FIFTY-TWO NATURE RAMBLES

A SERIES OF OPEN AIR TALKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

WITH COLOURED PLATES

AND OTHER ILLUSTRATIONS

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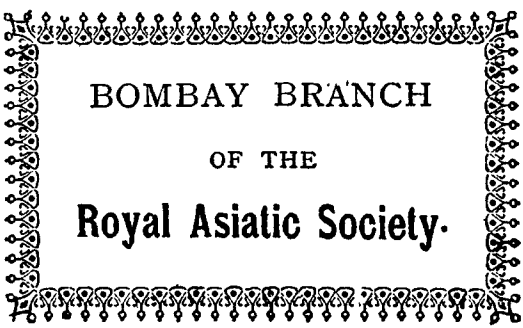
BY
PERCIVAL WESTELL,
F.L.S., M.B.O.U.



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THE EYED HAWK-MOTH.

Perfect insect, larva and pupa (chrysalis). Nearly life s

Fifty-Two Nature Rambles

A SERIES OF OPEN-AIR TALKS
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

54148

By
W. PERCIVAL WESTELL, F.L.S., M.B.O.U.
Author of 'Every Boy's Book of British Natural History,' etc.

WITH FIVE COLOURED PLATES FROM DRAWINGS BY C. F. NEWALL
AND ONE HUNDRED OTHER ILLUSTRATIONS FROM PHOTOGRAPHS.

LONDON
THE RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY
4 Bouverie Street and 65 St. Paul's Churchyard
1907

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To

STANLEY

THE COMPANION OF MY RAMBLES

I DEDICATE

THIS BOOK

PREFACE

WHILST primarily written to interest our girls and boys in the delights of Nature-study and out-door life in general, the author also hopes that this volume may be of some service to school teachers, and to others engaged in elementary Natural History work. He suggests that any of the Fifty-two Nature Rambles here recorded might, with advantage, be used as reading and object lessons in schools; or even out-of-doors, the teacher enlarging upon the subjects mentioned as time and place permit. Being seasonal, the particular Ramble for the time of year may be chosen, and it is believed that in this way the work will be appreciated and bear some educational value.

For permission to reproduce photos, the author is indebted to Messrs. C. F. Oakley, P. J. Butler, R. B. Imisson, H. G. Allen, J. Peat Millar, W. Moules, the Thornton-Pickard Manufacturing Co., A. E. Frost, P. Herbert, L. Cole, H. J. Divers, H. E. Forrest, S. G. Witcomb, A. D. R. Bacchus, J. H. Saunders, and Miss Percival-Wiseman. To all of these he offers his grateful thanks.

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INTRODUCTION

DEAR GIRLS AND BOYS,

This little book has been written specially for you, and I hope you will be interested in the many things which Stanley and I saw and heard during our Fifty-two Nature Rambles.

Although I will admit that my little nephew proved to be a very bright pupil, it is open for every girl and boy throughout this lovely country of ours to see and hear as much—if not more—than Stanley and I observed and heard during our weekly wanderings together.

You may not all be possessed of uncles willing or able to take you out into the fields and lanes, or through the wild greenwood, in order to point out to you the many interesting inhabitants in the fairy land of living things; but surely you can get to know some one—your schoolmaster or schoolmistress, perhaps some relative or friend—who will be only too willing to allow you to accompany them on their Nature walks.

This book has been written to show the many interesting things which may be studied in any

ordinary country district. Nature is ever waiting to unfold to us some of her treasures if we, on our part, will but use our eyes and ears aright as we wander along the countryside.

I always appreciate the opportunity of speaking to young people upon the beauties of Nature, and knowing, too, from experience the great fund of amusement and intelligent recreation to be gained from close intimacy with Dame Nature, I am anxious to instil into young and growing minds a love for, and interest in, all forms of wild life. Rest assured, dear girls and boys, that, when you reach manhood or womanhood, you will look back to your cradle days with Nature, so to speak, as red-letter days, and in after years you will be thankful a hundred times that when young you sowed Nature-study seeds in the garden of your mind.

But, you may ask, 'What can I study in Nature that has not already been studied so much that there is nothing new to be learned?' My answer is that our knowledge of no one single bird, mammal, reptile, fish, plant, insect, or any other form of wild life, is as yet anywhere complete. There is no branch of natural history which does not offer to any one who cares to probe into Nature's wonderful secrets a wealth of new and interesting facts, and an abundant storehouse of knowledge. The commonest wild plants—daisies

and dandelions, if you like—our most constant and abundant bird friends; the robin and the sparrow, if you will—the commonest insect—the house fly, for an example; all these and more besides have mysteries still unravelled, secrets still untold, wonderful stories only waiting to be inquired into.

A great mistake has been and is still being made by many lovers and students of Nature by the study afforded by rare, and the rarer, forms of wild life. In this rush for rarities much of the interest of common things is being overlooked, and the young student would do well to ignore this mania for collecting and observing scarce plants, birds, insects, etc., and devote his attention to the common inhabitants of the countryside.

To become a student of Nature does not consist of collecting in any form whatsoever. Collect notes from the living object, and enter them regularly and systematically in your Nature note-book by all means; let your field-glass, your microscope, and your camera be your constant companions; but disdain the collecting-box entirely, unless it is to be used to take home for the purpose of identification some common object, and after identification give the creature its liberty, be it a bird, a mammal, an insect, a reptile, or other form of wild life. Do not uproot plants from Nature's garden indiscriminately or unnecessarily; rather study them in their own wild fastnesses; be kind to all animals; let

your playmates and school chums know what interest and amusement are to be gained from a study of Nature. Whatever you do, do with your whole heart; and do not let your studies be half-hearted or lukewarm.

I wish you every success in your Nature studies, and can promise you a fund of amusement and pleasure, if you will only use your eyes and ears as did my nephew Stanley as herein recorded.

I am, Dear Girls and Boys,
Your faithful friend,
W. PERCIVAL WESTELL.

ST. ALBANS, HERTS,
SUMMER 1907.

FIFTY-TWO NATURE RAMBLES

I

JANUARY—FIRST WEEK

The Skylark—The Hunger of the Birds—Catkins—
The Ringdove

LITTLE STANLEY was a very bright boy. He liked to learn as much as he could, and was always asking questions. Where did the wind come from? Who made the rain and the snow? Why didn't the rose trees have roses on in the winter time? Why did the leaves fall off the trees? What made the windmill go round? And a host of other questions. To answer these and other questions, I promised, at the commencement of a New Year, to conduct the little fellow for a series of rambles through the fields, lanes, and woods; to tell him what I knew of the great book of Nature, and point out some of the many interesting objects to be seen along the countryside. I made him promise that he would ask me about anything he did not understand, and that he would always be kind to wild as well as tame creatures.

He was so delighted at the pleasure in store for him that he readily agreed to these conditions, and our first ramble took place on a cold, frosty morning in January.

Little Stanley and I had long been good friends; he was my favourite nephew, and hence I shall be referred to hereafter as Uncle.

We first made our way across the field towards a large wood, where I had often promised to take him. Now his wish was to be realized, and the little boy was highly delighted.

The air was biting cold, but up in the clouds a cheerful skylark was singing his sweet song. As I pointed my finger towards the little speck in mid-air, Stanley's face was a study in expression.

'Does the lark always sing in the air?' queried the lad.

'Not always,' I answered. 'I have often heard it singing whilst upon the ground, but its song has not that same attraction and beauty as it has when the bird is revelling in its power upon the wing, soaring and ever singing. Remember that the skylark is for the most part a "scorner of the ground." The poet Shelley called the bird by this name, and you should read the beautiful poem which this sweet poet wrote about the lark.'

'And does it never sing in a tree?'

'It has been known to perch in low trees, but very rarely. A near relative, the tree pipit, *does*

FIG. 1.—ROBIN REDBREAST.
FIG. 2.—CURIOSITY.

perch in trees, but, like the lark, builds its nest upon the ground.'

As we walked along, chatting merrily all the time, the air grew keener. The ground was quite hard as a result of the severe frost overnight, but we were well clothed, and managed to keep ourselves warm.

We were approaching the wood when my little companion became more excited.

'Wouldn't the keeper turn us back?' 'Could anybody go through the wood?' 'Where did the dead oak leaves come from?' 'What is that?' as some bird of the woodland uttered an alarm cry at our approach. These were a few of the questions which Stanley asked me as we rambled along.

A male chaffinch on a neighbouring tree shrieked 'pink, pink' as we passed through the gate leading to the wood, and a saucy robin redbreast, his bright eyes twinkling like diamonds, poured forth his pretty little song.

'Look, Uncle, look! What is that creeping through the hedge just there? Is it a rat?'.

'No, that is not a rat. Its movements are too quick and snake-like. It is a weasel hunting for food on this cold, frosty morning. When the ground is frozen, many birds and other animals find it a hard task to secure their breakfasts and dinners.'

'Do they die of cold?'

'No, not so much from cold as hunger. The little golden-crested wren, the smallest bird in Europe, braves the most severe winter, and although during our winter walks we may find some birds dead, hunger will probably be the reason for their deaths, starvation rather than cold. Many water birds, such as coots, moorhens, and wild-duck, may be seen in winter squatting on the ice, evidently not feeling any discomfort from their cold, icy surroundings.'

'I can see some little lambs'-tails on one of those trees.'

'Yes, you can. But do not in future call them lambs'-tails. What you can see there are the catkins of the nut-hazel tree. These catkins are the male blossoms, which early in the spring will be full of pollen, when they become larger, fuller, and yellower in colour. Later on, I shall show you the little red tufts of female blossom on the same tree, and explain to you exactly how nuts are formed. I am glad, however, that you are using your eyes to such advantage. Let them miss nothing; and keep your ears well open, too, for we can make many entries in our note-book solely by listening to the cries and calls of wild creatures. Even now I can hear the song of the ringdove. Probably you know this bird as the wood-pigeon. I never remember having heard it uttering its spring song in January before. It is a loud note,

isn't it? Listen! Some people compare its song to the words, "Don't scold so, Sukey." Although such a wild, timid bird, when seen in the country, it has taken up its abode in the very heart of London, and has suited itself to the noisy conditions which are there found. Presently I shall hope to show you its frail nest of twigs in some fir tree and its two beautiful white eggs.'

II

JANUARY—SECOND WEEK

Furze—The Yellow Bunting—The Lapwing—The Golden Plover

'YOU will have noticed that during January there are very few wild flowers to be seen.'

'Are there any at all so early in the year?'

'Well, we will see. We have rambled across a furze-common this fine, frosty morning, and have reached our destination. Now cast your eyes around, and see if you can see any signs of flowers.'

'I see a little piece of yellow at the foot of this prickly bush. Oh! how it pricks!'

'That is the furze. It has very sharp needle-like points upon the stems. Do you notice what a beautiful golden colour the flowers are? You must see this same furze-common later on in the year, when the whole expanse of furze is one mass of gold. In the spring it is one of the fairest floral sights of the year, and the pleasant perfume the plant throws off is also very attractive. Although this really beautiful wild plant is often passed by in

FIG. 3.—HOAR FROST.

this country, in Russia—that strange and vast land of hard-driven people—it is cultivated in greenhouses for its beauty.

'During dry weather the seed-pods, or legumes, burst, and go off with quite a loud report, and thus scatter the seeds a considerable distance. You see here one of Nature's wonderful means of distributing seeds. This plant is also called the gorse, or whin. It is due to the whin being a favourite haunt of the whinchat that this bird has acquired the first part of its name. The gorse has long been a favourite flower amongst poets, and you may like to hear two or three verses by different writers. One poet sings—

'"Barbed blossom of the guarded gorse,
I love thee where I see thee shine,
Thou sweetener of our common ways,
And brightener of our wintry days."

'Isn't that nice?

'The honey which is found in the blossoms is much sought after in the season of the year by those clever little bees. Of this sings the poet, too—

'"Thy honeyed blossoms are but hives
That guard the growth of winged lives."

'Finally, we may say, on this bleak winter's morning, that these first golden blossoms of the gorse are—

'"Tokens to the wintry earth that beauty liveth still."

'What do you say, you like poetry? Very well, then; we will, during our rambles and talks, introduce quotations from the poets whenever we can.'

'Just now I saw a lovely yellow bird on the top of one of these furze bushes, Uncle; was it a canary?'

'No, no, my observant nephew, it was certainly not a canary, although your description is a good one. It is, closely examined, a more beautiful bird than a canary, and a very common British bird. It is a yellow bunting, a fine male bird, in his pretty yellow and brown plumage. It is often called the yellow hammer.'

'Does it sing a song?'

'Yes, it utters a very pleasing little contribution to Nature's choir. It is a thin song, and the last note is long drawn out. When the hedgerows are greening, and the trees are bursting their buds, in early spring, and we are listening anxiously for the first call of the cuckoo, then we shall hear, you and I, the song of the yellow bunting. You may not be able to catch the song until you have heard it uttered several times. The songs and notes of birds are only learned by experience, but if you keep your ears well open and ask, whenever you hear a strange sound, there is no doubt that by the time our fifty-second ramble and talk takes place you will be able to know

many of our commoner wild birds by the notes they utter.'

'Oh, Uncle, on that ploughed field just now I saw quite a lot of large black-and-white birds with big wings; what were they?'

'Well done! I am glad you saw those birds, because they caught my eye, and I was wondering whether you also saw them. They were lapwings, called also peewits (because of their peculiar cry) and green plovers. They are most useful birds, doing a deal of good in the destruction of hurtful insects, of which the farmer is glad to get rid.'

'Do they build a nest in a tree?'

'No, they are ground-building birds, laying their four pear-shaped eggs in a field.'

'And do they build a nest?'

'Sometimes there is a sprinkling of grass and other things, but often the eggs are laid on the bare ground. The young ones are very pretty little creatures, and run about almost directly they come out of the shell. Just look at that bird which has risen in the air. Notice its wide-sweeping wings, and its beautiful snowy breast. See how it rises and falls and wheels along. It has settled now; look through my glasses and get a close view of the bird. Do you see it?'

'Oh yes; what a lovely bird! But what a funny thing it has upon its head. What is that?'

'That which you see upon its head is the crest,

and this gives the bird a very attractive appearance. In winter these birds go about together in companies, or flocks; and at this season, too, another near relative, the golden plover, visits us from the North. I hope we may see one of them during our rambles.'

FIG 4.—EXPECTATION.

III

JANUARY—THIRD WEEK

The Starling—The Dandelion

'UNCLE,' said Stanley, as we walked this morning past a big oak tree, on which several black-looking birds were sitting, 'I heard some one whistling just now. You know, whistling as if they wanted us. Who was it?'

'I am not surprised at what you say, for I noticed just now, more particularly than I have ever done before, how very like to a human being whistling is one of the notes uttered by the starling, for it was a bird you heard. When we passed that big oak tree, did you not notice many black-looking birds sitting on the branches near the top of the tree, revelling in the January sunshine? They were starlings. This is a very common British bird, and its numbers of late years have considerably increased. It is a very useful bird, too, ridding the land of many insects and caterpillars which do much harm to the farmers' crops. During the winter, starlings go about in flocks. When

birds flock together they are called gregarious. This is a big word for you, but remember it if you can, so that if at any time I mention any certain bird to you as being gregarious, you will understand what it means.'

'Does it sing a song?'

'Well, hardly. It chatters in a most peculiar manner, and also utters the human-like whistle which so deceived you. It is, however, a splendid imitator of the notes of other birds. We call that mimicry. I knew one which imitated the quack of the duck and the plaintive call of the cuckoo to perfection. When the summer comes I hope to find the rough nest of the starling built in a hole of a tree or underneath the eaves of some barn or other building. The beautiful light-blue and unspotted eggs will, I am sure, attract your attention. The egg of this bird is one of the most delicately coloured of any British bird.'

'Oh, Uncle! here is a dandelion in flower, the first I have seen since last summer.'

'Yes, that looks like being the first dandelion blossom of the year; but you surely noticed them in flower later than last summer, as they bloom late into the autumn. The poet has truly written—

'"Richly embossed in silken grass
The golden dandelion shines;
A sunflower, in the early spring,
And bright when summer eve declines."'

'What pretty lines, Uncle! but please tell me more about this lovely flower.'

'I am glad, Stanley, to hear you call the dandelion a lovely flower, because it is so often passed without notice by people who see no beauty in these common objects of the countryside. I am pleased, too, that you ask me to tell you more about the story of the dandelion, for you are keeping to your promise of our opening walk and talk by asking me questions.

'Well, the dandelion is what botanists call a composite. Let me tell you what that is. Although the particular bloom which your sharp little eyes chanced to see is the first of the year, just go and pluck it, and I will explain the flower to you. No, on second thoughts, let me take up the whole plant, leaves and root as well, and I will give you a little dandelion lecture all to yourself. Now see, we will take the flower-head first. How many flowers do I hold in my hand?'

'One dandelion flower, Uncle.'

'My boy, you are wrong. There are many flowers in that one flower-head, that is why it is called a composite. Now watch, see here, I take off what looks like one single petal, but this, in itself, is a complete flower. The beautiful large ray or disc of flowers is made up of a number of *florets*. Now try hard to remember what I am going to say. Each floret bears a style (which is

the female portion) and five stamens (the male portion); these latter are secured very closely to the style, so much so that you must look very carefully to see them. At the bottom of the floret there is what is called an ovary, which contains the seeds, and you will also notice a fringe of white hairs.

'These white hairs form what is called the *pappus*, and this, of course, has its use. After a while, the florets wither away, and then the ovary, or seed vessel, gets ripe. The narrow part above lengthens, and the tuft of hairs is carried up with it. These hairs spread themselves all round, and when the seeds are quite ripe you can observe the *pappus* to perfection. If you pluck one off when the dandelions are seeding you will have before you an apt illustration of a Nature-parachute.'

'Oh! what a dreadful long word, Uncle. Parachute!'

'Yes, to your childish ears it may be, but let me further explain. When you see the large roundish *pappus* on the dandelion, do you know what happens? The wind blows and dislodges some of the seed-heads. It carries them into the air, and by the aid of the parachute-like *pappus* they float along until they find a resting-place. The seed being at the base it reaches the ground seed downwards; when it falls it is thrust into

the soil, and soon starts to grow. We were going to explore such a lot to-day, but so far we have only talked about the starling and the dandelion, and even now our dandelion talk must be continued in our next.'

IV

JANUARY—FOURTH WEEK

The Dandelion—Its Flower-heads—Seeds—Name—Root

LET us continue our talk about the dandelion. Do you know that in one single flower-head there are over 150 florets! Now, as I have told you, each of these florets is a complete flower, and if all the 150 florets become fertilized and one half of the seeds get dibbed into the ground—that would be 75—and grow into plants, next year each one of those 75 plants will have, we will say, at least two flower-heads, each containing say 150 florets. We will work this out. We should then get 150 flower-heads containing 150 florets each, and 150 multiplied by 150 amounts to 22,500, or, to put it into words, twenty-two thousand five hundred. Perhaps you can now more easily understand why it is that there are so many dandelions in the seasons of the year.

'Let me carry this interesting sum a little farther. There are many fields, I know, where one

FIG. 5.—THE WOODLAND IN JANUARY.

could easily count 2000 dandelion flower-heads. Now, if each flower-head contains an average of 150 florets, how many is that altogether?'

'Oh! Uncle, I have only reached the 12 times table at school, and I should have to ask teacher to do the sum for me.'

'Yes, perhaps the figures are too difficult for you to work out, so that I will give you the answer. 2000 multiplied by 150 equals 300,000 —three hundred thousand! Now, if one half of the seeds of those 300,000 florets germinate, namely 150,000; and those 150,000 plants have 2 flower-heads upon each plant next summer, that means 300,000 flower-heads; and if each of those 300,000 flower-heads bears 150 florets, it means that (if all come to seed) there would be no less than 45,000,000 (forty-five millions) seeds ready to be distributed. And when it is borne in mind that this multiplication takes place year after year, we may well wonder why there are not more dandelions than there are.'

'I can hardly understand what that large number means, Uncle. I have heard teacher explaining to us what a very big number one million is, but forty-five millions!'

'Yes, indeed, few people can have any idea of the vastness of even a single million, much less many millions; but we will leave these figures and look again upon this common but interesting

wild plant. Now, do you know why, on second thoughts, I uprooted the whole plant instead of merely plucking the flower-head?'

'No; please tell me.'

'Because I wanted to show you how the leaves form a rosette upon the ground and prevent any other plants springing up and choking the dandelion—an instance of the survival of the fittest in wild Nature—how curiously the leaves appear to be bitten off, and what a long root it has. Now, just look at this leaf; doesn't it look as if a rabbit or some other animal had been biting pieces off the edges? It is what is called a toothed leaf. Notice that this is more apparent towards the bottom of the leaf. Now, what does this teach us?'

'I cannot think of an answer, Uncle, but I am so enjoying this dandelion-talk; please tell me.'

'Well, it is from this very fact that the dandelion has been given its name. The teeth of the powerful lion have the points curved backwards, and the French for tooth of lion is *dent-de-leon*, and this, in course of time, has become dandelion.'

'Oh! Uncle, I should never have thought that was the answer.'

'You will be further surprised to know, perhaps, that dandelion leaves make splendid

salad, in the same way as lettuce grown in the garden does; but not until the leaves are blanched —before then they are bitter. Now, blanched is another word for bleached, and this means when the leaves lose their green colour. When they turn colour, the bitterness disappears; the green colour, as you see it here, and the bitter taste, are both due to the light.

'Now we come to the root, and although we have not nearly exhausted the fund of information about this common wayside flower, we must close our talk by a reference to it. Notice how long it is; you saw how hard I had to pull and struggle before I could unearth it, and even then I broke a piece off. Well, when these roots are washed and dried, they can be ground to powder. When in this state they are made into pills, and do people good—Nature's own medicines, far better than the often injurious concoctions of the present day. And beyond this, when the dried roots are roasted like coffee berries, it is possible to grind them and make them into coffee, and many people like dandelion coffee as well as the better-known article of commerce.'

'About the long roots, Uncle; my father dibs them up off the lawn or cuts them with a knife.'

'Yes, that is where your father is "penny wise and pound foolish," for in dibbing or cutting

them off he does not destroy the plant, which will spring up again. Tell him what you have learned about the dandelion and what a long root it has, and then he will use more care when he is dandelion-grubbing in future.'

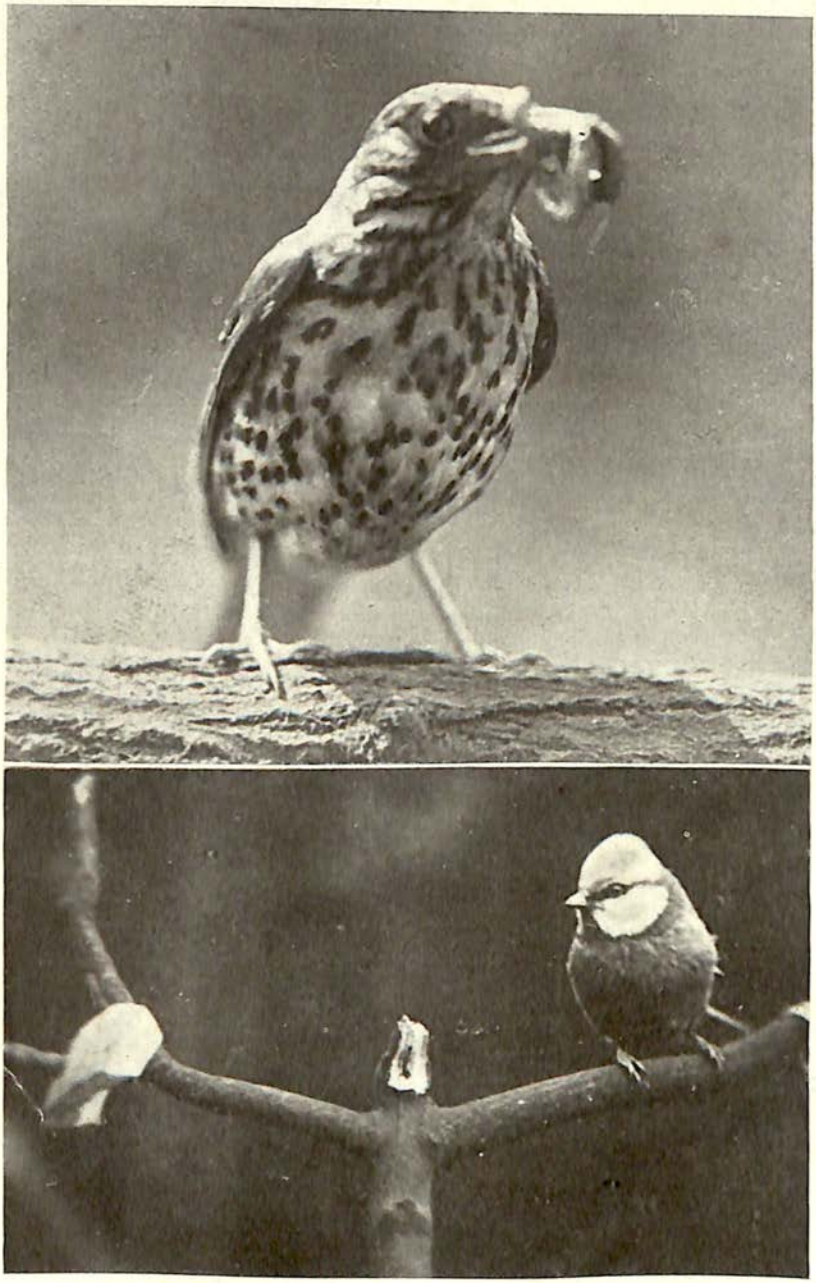


FIG. 6.—SONG THRUSH WITH WORM.
FIG. 7.—BLUE TITMOUSE IN THE GARDEN.

V

JANUARY—FIFTH WEEK

The Fox—The Winter Wind

TO-DAY, as Stanley and I took our fifth walk, the east wind was piercingly cold, and it needed no little enthusiasm to leave a warm fireside for the cold, bleak air outside. Besides blowing an easterly gale, there was severe frost, the ice being quite thick. Even some Scotch heifers, which we passed, seemed to feel the icy cold wind through their dappled hides, and were standing under the lee side of a barn, sphynx-like and grim sentinels, motionless.

Before we left home, we had ample evidence that we were to have a severe spell of weather, for early this morning there were several bird visitors in the garden who only pay us a visit when

> 'Stern Winter throws its icy grasp,
> Encircling Nature round.'

Thrushes, blackbirds, chaffinches, hedge and house sparrows, brown wrens, great and blue tits,

and starlings, all partook eagerly of the tit-bits of food which we had placed out for them—and at such times it is most interesting to notice how each species of bird vary in their movements. Some come hopping up the garden path boldly and with courage, others waddle along rather than hop (especially the starlings), and so on. The starlings fight like very demons, screaming aloud and using words only to be found in a bird dictionary. The little brown wren flits about hither and thither, like some upturned brown leaf being blown about by the wind.

Although so very cold, as we approached the woodland we could hear in the far distance the loud note of the male ring-dove as he was probably snugly hiding amongst the thick branches of a fir tree. As we got quite close to the wood, Stanley suddenly became greatly excited; and I at once saw the cause of this, for out of the wood, and into the open field bordering the same, a fine young fox appeared—a cub of last summer.

'Oh, Uncle, what a lovely animal! It is the first time I have ever seen a real live fox.'

'Yes, the fox is indeed a beautiful creature. Notice, before it observes us, its lovely bushy tail and cat-like movements. See how quiet its movements are, and how wary and artful it is. There, I only directed your attention to it just in time,

for it has bounded off into the wood, and even if we wait patiently for hours the chances are against our seeing the animal any more to-day You would think that scampering through the wood over the dead groundwork of leaves would result in the fox making a loud noise as it hurries along, but this is not so. It is very fleet of foot, touching the ground lightly, so as to make as little noise as possible. Seeing this particular fox out searching for food in broad daylight is a sure sign of hard weather, for they mostly search for food at night, when man, the fox's enemy, is safely in bed. Yet, although it is reckoned as vermin, gamekeepers and farmers do not often shoot or trap foxes, because hunting them is supposed to afford rare sport to men and women who can find nothing better, or more noble, to occupy their attention. Fox-hunting is a cruel and mean sport, and in these days, when we hear so much about humane principles, it is a thousand pities that there are still those who hunt the fox because of the so-called pleasure it affords them.'

'Do foxes do any harm, Uncle?'

'Yes, unfortunately they do. They seem often to kill for killing's sake, and I could tell you several instances which have come under my notice of dozens of pheasants and fowls being killed by foxes during the course of one single night. This does not, however, warrant fox-hunting, and it is

to be hoped that before long this sport may be reckoned as a thing of the past.

'Look in that little box-tree, Stanley, and see if you can see signs of any birds' nests. It is very early yet, but perchance some impatient blackbird or thrush may have built a family nursery already.'

'Yes, I see a nest, Uncle,' answered Stanley, bubbling over with excitement.

'Let me see it,' I said. 'Yes, it is a nest without a doubt, but it is an old one of last summer. It is that of a song-thrush. See how well it has withstood the winter, and is still in good preservation.'

'How the wind blows, Uncle, and what a noise it makes.'

'Yes, the winter wind blows strong and keen, and this reminds me of two verses written by the great poet Shakespeare, which I will recite to you as a conclusion to this week's walk and talk. Shakespeare, in *Love's Labour's Lost*, says—

'"When icicles hang by the wall,
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
And milk comes frozen home in pail,
When blood is nipped, and ways be foul,
Then nightly sings the staring owl:—
To-who;
To-wit, to-who, a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

When all aloud the wind doth blow,
And coughing drowns the parson's saw,
And birds sit brooding in the snow,
And Marion's nose looks red and raw,
When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
To-who;
To-wit, to-who, a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot."'

VI

FEBRUARY—FIRST WEEK

Early Spring—February Flowers—The Hedge-Sparrow—Formation of Nuts

WHAT a change in the weather, to be sure! Winter has given way to spring, and to-day, as Stanley and I rambled through a portion of the charming county of Surrey, we both agreed that early spring had indeed arrived.

Spring was in the air; you could see it, hear it, and smell it. You could see it because of the way in which the buds were swelling along the hedgerows; the daisies had opened their eyelids to the February sunshine, and the male blossoms of the nut hazel were a picture of yellow and gold. You could see the spring along the hedgerows, not only because of the quickly swelling buds, but because of the change of colour of the whole hedge-line. Where it looked black, cold, and bare a few short weeks ago, now a purplish colour could be seen right along the hedgerow, and more especially where the welcome sunshine caught it. We see

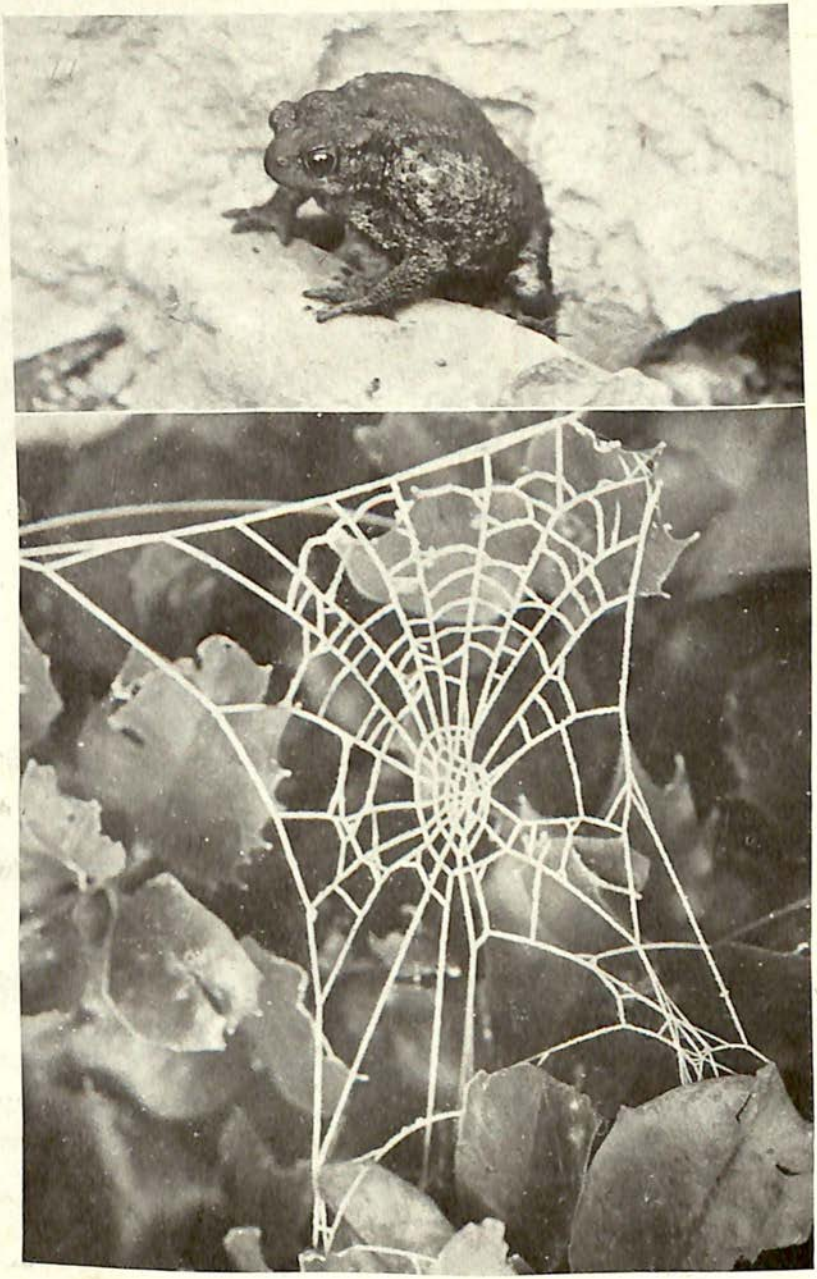


FIG. 8.—THE TOAD COMES FORTH FROM HIS HIDING-PLACE.
FIG. 9.—FROST ON SPIDER'S WEB.

the spring in the winter aconites and the snowdrops raising their yellow heads and white bells in the cottage gardens, and in the early courtships of several species of birds. The rooks were very busy on this quiet morning in rural England, revelling in the sunlight, basking in the balmy spring air.

I said you could hear the spring! How could you hear it? Why, by the voices of innumerable happy birds. No longer now does the frisky chaffinch keep his vocal efforts to 'pink, pink, pink,' for to-day we heard him singing his spring notes. The air was full of bird music; bird songs flooded the air and filled all Nature with joy and happiness at the approach of spring-time. The larks were towering aloft in the blue ether overhead; mellow blackbirds offered their pleasing matins, and song-thrushes uttered music such as no other British songster has at his command. Blithe little hedge-sparrows warbled sweetly one to another, or else jealously against each other, and drew forth this remark from my companion—

'Did you say that song came from a hedge-sparrow, Uncle? I always thought the sparrow "chirped," and could not sing.'

'Yes, that pretty song was uttered by a hedge-sparrow, but you must not confound this bird with the much commoner species, the house-sparrow. This latter belongs to the finch family, and is a

poor songster, whilst the hedge-sparrow, or hedge-accentor, belongs to the warblers, amongst which family we have—during the summer—some of the finest bird musicians in the whole wide, wide world.'

'I should like to know, Uncle, the names of some of these other warblers.'

'You are wise to ask me questions. It shows that you are taking an interest in our walks with, and talks about, Nature. Well, prominent warblers found in our country during the summer are the nightingale, the blackcap, the whitethroat, the garden warbler, the grasshopper warbler, and several others.'

'And is the hedge-sparrow related to such a beautiful songbird as the nightingale?'

'Yes, indeed it is; and the pity of it is that this exquisite little bird of steel-grey and brown plumage should be so often regarded as a mere sparrow. It is not a sparrow at all, it is a warbler. It lives almost entirely upon insects—nearly all the warblers do the same—and does nobody any harm. Its lovely moss nest and delicate pale-blue eggs I hope to show you later in the year.'

'Oh, Uncle, here are some more catkins of the nut-hazel. I remember you told me that this was the male blossom. I also remember that you promised to tell me how nuts were formed. Please tell me.'

'I am glad you reminded me of my promise, because we shall now see and hear so many things right up to next autumn, that it will be difficult for me to choose which subjects to talk about and which not to talk about. However, let me tell you, shortly, the story of the nut. Now, you know the yellow catkins are the male blossoms. Bear that in mind. I will pull down that heavily catkin-laden branch there and see what we can find. Here, just look along that branch and see if you can see anything you have never seen before.'

'No, Uncle, I can see nothing except some buds which are forming.'

'Look more closely, my boy, and look particularly at the tips of some of those buds.'

'I see, I see.'

'Well, what do you see?'

'I see some little red flowers, so small that I could hardly make them out at first.'

'Yes, you have spotted what I wanted you to see. Those little tufts of red flowers are the female blossoms, or pistils. The catkins we call staminate flowers, because they bear stamens, and the little tufts of red blossom we call pistillate flowers, because they are made up of pistils. Now, it is necessary for me to go a little further. Watch me shake this bough.'

'Oh, Uncle, I saw a lot of yellow dust.'

'That is just what I wanted you to observe.

Now, that which you saw was pollen, which came from the ripe anthers of the stamens; it was not dust, it was precious pollen. That pollen has got to come into contact with the pistils, those little red tufts of female blossom, to enable nuts to be formed. How do you think the pollen reaches these female flowers?'

'I cannot think, Uncle.'

'Well, I will tell you. When the anthers in the stamens are full of pollen, and ready to burst, the early spring winds are about, that is, in February or early March. The winds then blow away; these catkins sway to and fro, the anthers are shaken, the wind carries the pollen along on its bosom, and the female blossoms receive the pollen on their sticky stigmas as it passes. This is a typical wind-fertilized flower. Later in the year I shall tell you what provision Nature has made for fertilizing flowers which are not fertilized by wind.

'Next, the pollen having been deposited on the top of the pistil, called the stigma, a little tube is thrust down the style or stalk of the pistil into the ovary, at the base. In this ovary is an egg, or ovule, and this has to be fertilized, or it will come to nothing. The contents of the precious pollen-grain follow the tube down, thrusts itself into the egg or ovule, and fertilization is effected. The seed then commences to grow rapidly; the ovary

which contained the egg or ovule (and which latter, in time, becomes the kernel of the nut) hardens, and becomes the shell of the nut; the husk is formed from the little buds which look like leaf-buds, and there you have a short account of one of Nature's wondrous object lessons.'

VII

FEBRUARY—SECOND WEEK

The Nut-Hazel again—Why Birds Sing—Their Plumage —The first Primrose

ALTHOUGH our last Nature walk and talk concluded by a reference to the nut-hazel, Stanley and I so much enjoyed our ramble amongst the hazel catkins this bright February morning, that I feel they must bear pride of place in this seventh ramble.

Never do I remember such a wonderful display of male blossom as during this season, and neither do I know of any fairer floral sight in the whole realm of Nature so early in the year. The anthers of the stamens are loaded with pollen—indeed, some of the catkins are already looking quite ragged in appearance, as if their work had been accomplished—and as there has been no rain to speak of during the whole of January, and the catkins are perfectly dry, every puff of wind sends out quite a little cloud of precious pollen. We—Stanley and I—shook many of the branches to-day, and so lent a helping hand to Dame Nature.

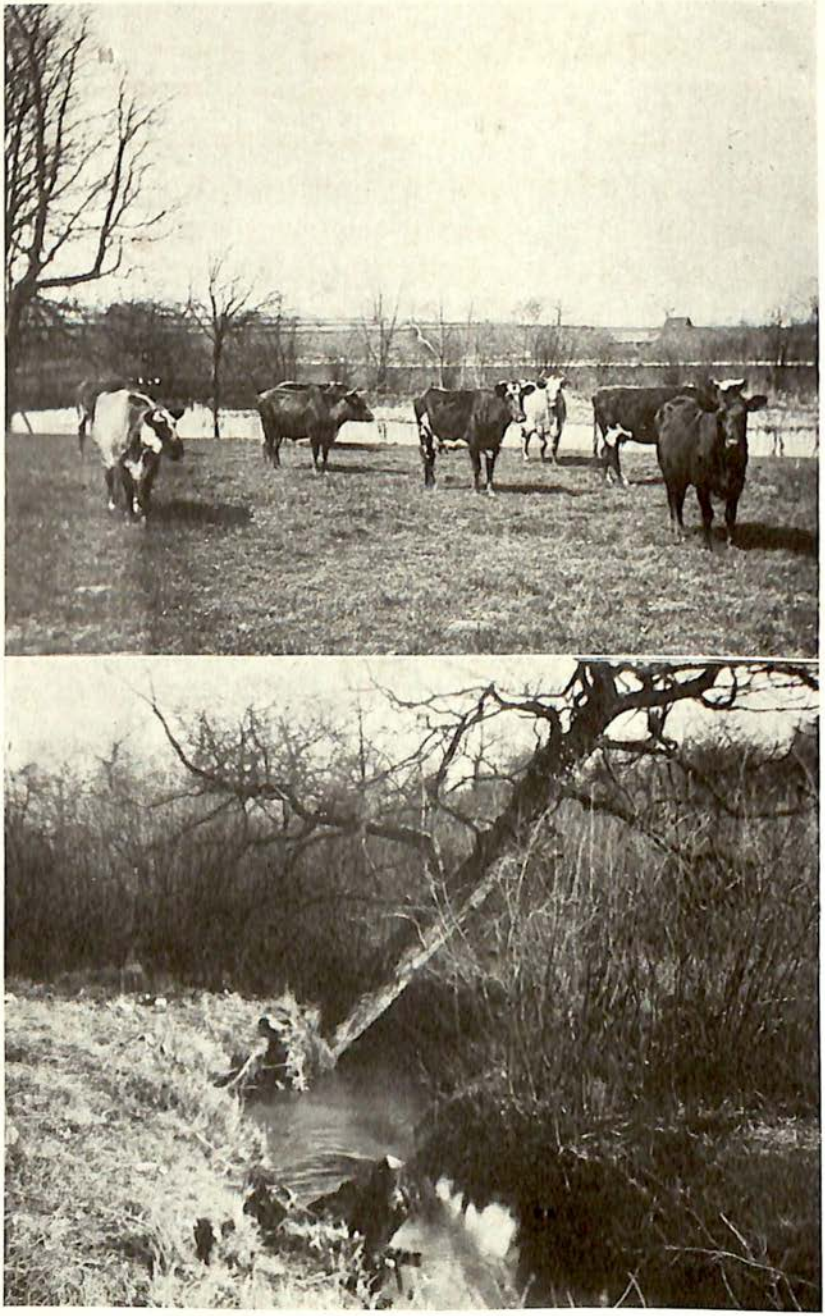


FIG. 10.—CATTLE IN EARLY SPRING.

FIG. 11.—THE RESULT OF THE WINTER'S RAINS—A FALLING MONARCH.

From all appearances, it is to be a most prolific nut year. Never do I remember such a wealth of female blossom, and to-day—February 12—they were seen to greater perfection than at any other time during the year. Stanley is now well acquainted with the little red tufts of female blossom, and often, as we pass through a wood, he pulls down a branch of his own accord, and examines it eagerly for a sight of the pistillate flowers. Now we really must leave the nut-hazel, much as we should like to continue writing of it in its many interesting aspects.

'Stanley,' I said this morning, as my little companion and I set out with hearts light and free, 'notice every week now, how the chorus of the birds increases. We shall observe a great increase in the volume of music uttered by the woodland choir every week, and this will go on until our summer bird visitors from across the seas reach us early in April. Then you will hear such a bird chorus as you have never heard before, for the simple reason that you have never listened for it. It is really wonderful what people can see and hear when they commence to use their eyes and ears.'

'And shall we hear all these birds singing right through the summer, Uncle?'

'Oh no; the songs will increase daily until the merry month of May, when bird music reaches a

climax; that is to say, it is at its height, and soon afterwards the songs decrease.'

'Why, Uncle?'

'For the reason that most birds, when they commence nesting, cease singing. Their courtship days are over, and they must devote their more serious attention to rearing children to tenant the family nursery. Birds often sing—especially in the early spring, when bird music is heard at its best—to attract a female partner for the coming summer; the song is an attraction to the female, in the same way as a gaudily plumaged bird attracts a partner, for it is the rule that birds which have bright colours do not possess a song. Birds which sing—the warblers especially, and of which I told you something in our last talk—are more often of sober dress, so that they must possess some other attractions wherewith to woo and win their lady loves. This they accomplish by means of their lovely voices.'

'Oh, Uncle, I never thought that was the reason why birds sing. I always thought they sang because they were happy, and to please us.'

'I am not at all surprised at you misunderstanding what birds' songs mean, for not one person in a hundred does understand them. Even experienced bird students (called ornithologists) cannot interpret what the language of birds means, but we do know that a song uttered by a male

bird often leads to his captivating a female partner. Now we must leave the birds, for we have talked about them at some length; but, before doing so, just listen for a moment to that bell-like note in the distance.'

'I hear it, Uncle. What is it?'

'It is a great titmouse uttering its spring song, and perhaps endeavouring to attract a female in the very manner I have just described to you. Now, it is mid-February, and to-day I want to find a primrose in this leafy copse. Use your eyes to advantage, and see who will find the first one.'

No sooner had I said these words, than I espied the first primrose blossom of the year at my very feet.

'Look here, Stanley, I am afraid I have forestalled you. Here, at my feet, is the first pale primrose of early spring.'

'Oh, Uncle, how quickly you found one! I can see ever so many leaves, but no flowers. Doesn't it look pretty?'

'Yes, it is a rich treat to observe this first primrose. It is a sure promise of spring, and later on, in a few weeks' time, the whole woodland here will be quite carpeted with the pale blossoms of what Shakespeare described as—

'"Primrose, first-born child of Ver,
Merry springtime's harbinger."'

VIII

FEBRUARY—THIRD WEEK

The Song-Thrush and the Blackbird—The Snail—Rabbits and their Tails—The Stoat

'HARK at the chorus of the thrushes this morning, Stanley! Listen attentively to each bird's song, and notice that hardly any two thrushes sing alike. That is the song-thrush, for the mistle-thrush (or stormcock, as he is called) does not vary in the measure of his song nearly so much as his relative. Just listen to the thrush chorus now, and carefully pick out if you can the more sober, mellow notes of the sooty blackbird.'

'Which song do you like the best, Uncle, the blackbird's or the song-thrush's?'

'I do not like one better than the other: I like them both. They are so distinct, too, that comparison is out of the question. Now, I want you to know these two birds by their songs. Listen to that song-thrush singing his spring notes from the top of that oak tree. Hark, how he

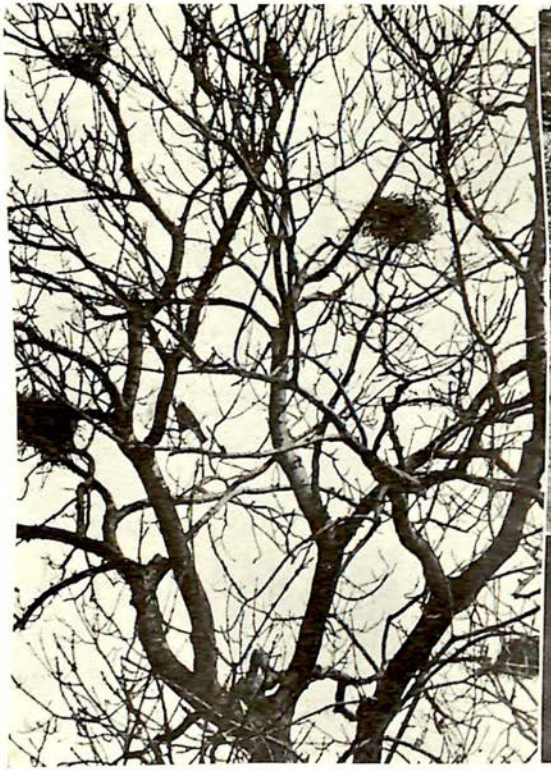


FIG. 12.—ROOKS COMMENCE NESTING.

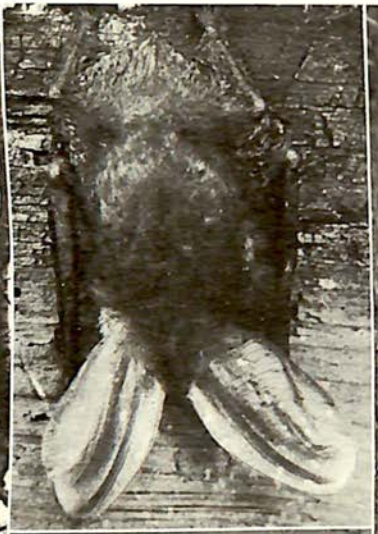


FIG. 13.—LONG-EARED BAT.

FIG. 14.—FEMALE HOUSE SPARROW.

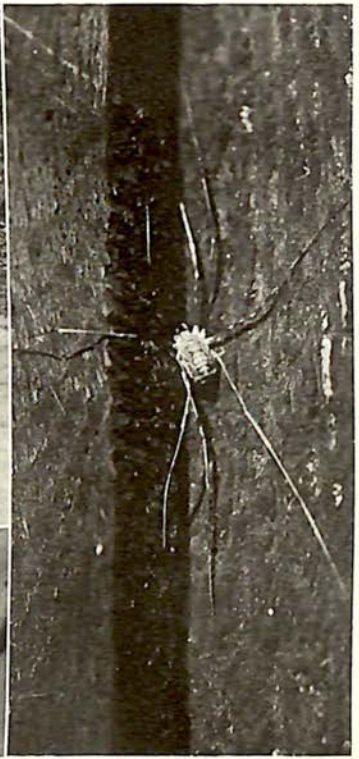


FIG. 15.—THE SPIDER BEGINS TO MOVE.

varies them, and listen to the harsh notes he introduces. He rarely utters the same notes twice. The bird hardly seems to know the extent of the music he has at his command, and always seems to be striving to surpass himself. Some song-thrushes sing much better than others, and at times you hear such beautiful notes that you can but be charmed by the captivating song of this favourite British songster. I like his loud notes best; they sound to me the richest in the thrush's song, and can be heard a great distance away.

'As regards the blackbird, having once heard the song, you may be fairly confident of being able to fix it again. The song varies very little; the notes are more measured, mellow, solemn, and vesper-like than those of the speckled-breasted thrush. Occasionally, I have listened to a very special song of the blackbird. I recall one morning, last springtide, in this very wood, when a fluty blackbird perched on yonder tree flooded the air with its liquid notes.

'Speaking of the thrush reminds me that yesterday I saw one which had unearthed a snail from its hiding-place, and was smashing it on a stone. Thrushes have favourite stones on which to smash the snails, and one may often come across the remnants of a feast in his walks with Nature.'

'And where are all the snails now, Uncle?'

'They congregate together at the approach of hard weather, and hide in any convenient hole in a wall, underneath fences, posts, and in other situations. They exude a slimy secretion when winter approaches; this hardens, and master snail is then secure from frost-bite, and makes himself snug and warm in his shell-house until the advent of spring. Would you like me to recite to you a few lines about the snail, written by Charles Lamb?'

'Yes, do, please, Uncle.'

'Very well, I will. Charles Lamb addresses his witty and clever lines to "The Housekeeper," and they run thus:—

'"The frugal snail, with fore-cast of repose,
Carries his house with him where'er he goes;
Peeps out—and if there comes a shower of rain,
Retreats to his small domicile amain.
Touch but a tip of him, a horn—'tis well—
He curls up in his sanctuary shell.
He's his own landlord, his own tenant; stay
Long as he will, he dreads no Quarter Day.
Himself he boards and lodges; both invites
And feasts himself; sleeps with himself o' nights.
He spares the upholsterer trouble to procure
Chattels; himself is his own furniture,
And his sole riches. Wheresoe'er he roam—
Knock when you will—he's sure to be at home."

How do you like that?'

'Splendid, Uncle. I do love these little pieces of poetry about Nature which you recite to me,

It helps me to remember so many of the things you tell me.'

'What a number of rabbits there are scampering through the wood this morning, Stanley! Have you noticed any?'

'Yes; there goes one this very minute, Uncle. Oh! how he bobs about; just look at his little white tail!'

'I wonder, Stanley, whether you can tell me why the rabbit has that white upturned tail?'

'No, I cannot guess; do tell me.'

'Well, you see, when danger threatens, the wary rabbits start running towards their holes or any places of retreat, and as they do so, their little white upturned tails can be seen by the other rabbits who are feeding some distance away from those who first scented danger. The white tail thus acts as a danger signal, in the same way as the red light of a signal on the railway line warns the engine-driver that there is danger ahead. One is Nature's danger signal, the other is man's. Look at what is hanging on this hazel tree, Stanley—a stoat, lately trapped by the keeper. Notice the long, tapering body, which enables the artful little animal to creep through quite a small hole, its yellow belly, brown back, black-tipped and lengthy tail, and its moustache?'

'What a lovely animal, Uncle! But why did the keeper kill it?'

'Well, you see, the nesting season is coming along very soon now, and stoats do a great deal of harm to pheasants. I knew of a pair of stoats which robbed over fifty pheasants' eggs and packed them away under the ground in rows, as if they had been put there by human hands. How do you think the stoats carried the eggs?'

'In their mouths, Uncle?'

'No; all the eggs were quite whole, not one cracked or broken, and the keeper who told me of this incident happened to see the stoats moving the eggs. They first rolled them out of the nests, and then pushed them along the ground with their snouts, and so eventually reached their hiding-place without any mishap.'

FIG. 16.—THE BRAMBLE IN FEBRUARY IS PLEASING TO THE EYE.

IX

FEBRUARY—FOURTH WEEK

Strong Winds—The Rainbow—The Dauntless Skylark—Flying against the Wind—The Palm—Green Hellebore—Dog's Mercury

WHEN my companion and I ventured to take our ninth walk this cold, blustering morning, it was raining hard, and the south wind blew strong and keen. Poor little fellow, I really pitied him as we faced the wind; but he was well wrapped up, and, after all, the brisk walk made us both feel better in health and temper, so that we were amply rewarded for any discomfort we were put to. And, more than this, as we had both resolved that, given good health and strength, we would have a walk with, and a talk about, Nature once a week for a whole year, without missing a single week, we were pleased, on this aforesaid dismal morning, that we ventured out, and did not have cause to break the terms of our agreement.

After we had returned from our walk, the rain

came down in torrents, and the wind raged fiercer than ever; after that there were more 'intervals'—bright fitful gleams of sunshine, storms of rain and hail, more sunshine, a brilliant rainbow sandwiched in between, more wind and rain, and then, late at night, a snowfall!

We are near the end of the shortest month of the year, and the rain and snow have only come just in time to keep up the reputation of February-fill-the-dyke! Yes, as I have said, we had a beautiful rainbow to-day, which interested Stanley very much. I am not quite sure, but I think it is the first one he has ever seen. Since he saw it his little eyes have been peering skywards, and he is anxiously inquiring as to when the next 'coloured rope up in the sky' will be seen! And as I gazed at those beautiful colours in the clouds overhead, and watched the fitful gleams of sunshine playing hide-and-seek across the landscape, I was reminded that this day, February 26, was the fifty-fifth anniversary of the death of the poet Thomas Moore. The sight of the rainbow reminded me of the two verses, entitled 'Erin,' which Moore wrote. Here they are:

'Erin! The tear and the smile in thine eyes
Blend like the rainbow that hangs in thy skies!
Shining through sorrow's stream,
Saddening through pleasure's beam,
Thy suns with doubtful gleam
Weep while they rise.

Erin! Thy silent tear never shall cease,
Erin! Thy languid smile ne'er shall increase,
Till, like the rainbow's light,
Thy various tints unite,
And form in Heaven's sight
One arch of peace!'

I am forgetting about our Nature-talk, however, and must hasten on.

'Uncle,' said Stanley, 'although the wind is blowing, and it is raining so hard, I can hear a skylark singing in the clouds above us!'

'Yes, you can,' I answered. 'The skylark does not stop at trifles; he is not a fair-weather bird! no rain, hail, wind, snow, heat, storm, or tempest affects the blithe bird as to its singing and soaring. Hark now, between the soughing of the wind, and you will hear many larks in jubilant voice.'

'I hear quite a number, Uncle.'

'Yes, and notice also that all of them are singing with their heads to the breeze. If there is any wind blowing and skylarks up aloft singing, you may be certain that their heads point towards the direction from which the wind blows. The lark thus acts as a feathered wind-compass.'

'I should have thought that the bird would soar and sing with its back to the wind, Uncle.'

'A good many people think the same, Stanley, but just consider the matter for a moment. If it soared in the air with its back towards the wind, the wind would blow and ruffle its feathers and

overbalance the bird in its aërial flight, whereas this difficulty is not experienced when it faces the wind; and so when birds fly across the seas to foreign countries—and when birds from foreign lands come to us—they often, in fact they prefer to fly against a head wind. If they proceeded with the wind at their backs they would suffer much discomfort from the wind blowing up and ruffling their feathers, and would be quite unable to balance themselves properly, or steer their little feathered bodies across the tempestuous seas below them.

'Now we have reached the woodland once again; do you notice how green many things are looking? Here is the honeysuckle, for instance, quite leafed with fresh green leaves—one of the very earliest plants to put on its spring dress. Quite close by is the elder, which is well leafed, too. Many other trees and plants are simply waiting for the advent of March-many-weathers before they burst into greenery. If March belies its name, and does not consist of many weathers, the whole woodland would be quite green towards the end of the month; but if the old adage is kept up, and the month is very changeable, we shall have to wait until after April Fool's Day before we can welcome to any great extent the real green flush of spring.

'Notice on that tree yonder the beautiful silver buds. What tree do you think it is?'

'Tell me, Uncle, please.'

'Well, it is the male sallow, which you and many other people called the palm. Unlike the nut-hazel, the male and female blossoms of the sallow grow on different trees, and are not found on one and the same tree. The male is the beautiful golden palm; the female blossom is not so beautiful, being more ragged-looking. Here at our feet is the green hellebore, one of the very earliest wild woodland plants to thrust its leaves and flower-heads through the leafy undergrowth. Here is the dog's mercury, a very common woodland and hedge-side plant. Both species of plants as you see, bear green flowers, and you will notice as spring advances, that most of the earliest spring flowers are green or yellow in colour. The great variety of colour comes later in the year, when each plant vies with its fellow in luxury of dress for the purpose of attracting the countless insect visitors then upon the wing. As so few insects are out and about in early spring, the plants which then blossom have no need for very conspicuous coloration.'

X

MARCH—FIRST WEEK

Nettles—Insect Fertilization—River Weeds—Lambs—Moles

'STANLEY, I have been going to point out to you on one or two of our recent walks, how the various species of nettles are progressing. Look here, at the fresh yellowish-green leaves of the stinging nettle, and, on that sunny bank over the other side of the pathway, see what a nice patch of colour is thrown off by the red dead nettle.'

'What a funny name, Uncle, dead nettle! What does it mean?'

'This plant is called dead nettle to distinguish it from the stinging nettle. Besides the red dead nettle, the white dead nettle is also in flower now, but the third common species, the yellow dead nettle, or archangel, does not flower until later in the year.

'Ah! here are a few plants of white dead nettle, and look, did you see that venturesome bee

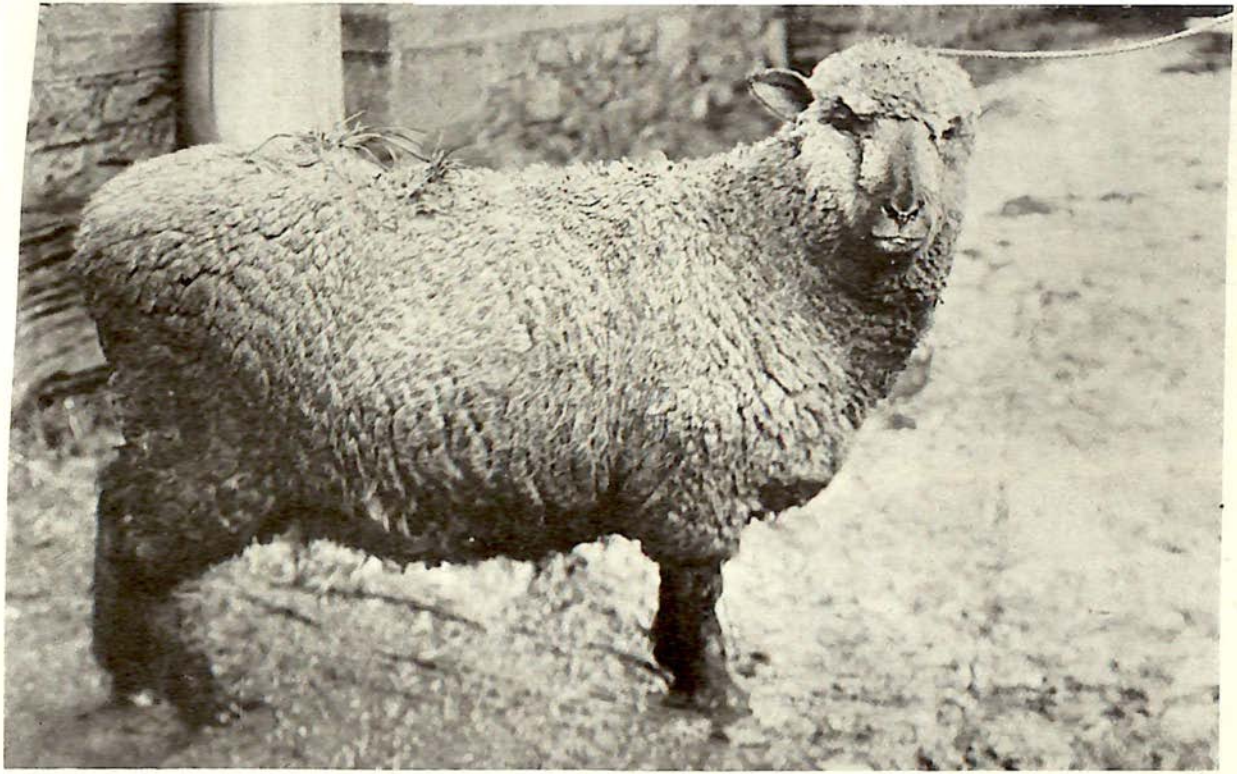


FIG. 17.—SPROUTING WHEAT ON SHEEP'S BACK.

alight on the platform of the flower? See how he is driving his head into the blossom to secure the sweet honey secreted at the base of what is known as the corolla tube. And do you know that in doing this the bee performs a very wonderful act in the way of fertilization?

'He alights on this platform—see, I have plucked one single flower for you to look at closely—and then pushes his way into the mouth of the flower. As he does so his head comes in contact with the stamens, and he is dusted with pollen. After he has secured some honey, he visits another flower, and the same process is repeated. Then, when the pollen is gathered in any quantity upon the industrious insect's little body, it so happens that portions of it come into contact with the stigma of the pistil, and thus what is known as cross- or insect-fertilization is effected.

'See how beautifully the stamens are packed away in the roof of the flower, and notice how Nature has formed this covering so as to protect the stamens and the inside of the flower from rain. Notice how hairy the petals are, and how, when this roof-like petal at the roof is pressed down, it shields the precious contents within. The platform for the bee to alight upon I have already pointed out to you. In this very common flower of the wayside one may learn many interesting object-lessons. Touch the leaves and prove for

yourself that they do not "sting," for I notice you are half afraid they will, and shrink from them whenever I put them near you.'

'Won't they really sting me, Uncle?'

'Well, see here, I will brush this plant against my face. There, it hasn't had the least effect upon me; and now, in future, you will be able to identify a dead nettle when you see one.

'The flowers of the stinging nettle are greenish in colour, and are not arranged in whorls like the three dead nettles I have mentioned. Moreover, the stinging nettle will not be in blossom for some weeks yet.

'Now we have reached the river. Let us walk by it for some little way, as I want you to see the weeds, which at this season look beautiful and green, a sort of spring-in-advance, so to speak. See how the leaves of most of the river weeds you can observe are deeply cut up, so that the water may pass between them and not tear them away from their watery bed. How fresh and green this pasture-land appears, and how very delightful those young lambs look—sprightly little creatures. Do you like to see the lambs gambolling in the March sunshine?'

'Yes, Uncle, I love lambs. They look such pretty and innocent little animals. I should like to have one of my very own.'

'Listen to their bleatings; notice what a weak

voice that of the lamb is when compared with that of its mother. See also how each lamb knows its mother, and notice how anxious the ewes are—for the mother sheep is called a ewe—that their little children should keep close beside them.

'In this field, too, just observe these heaps of rich mould which have been thrown up by the moles. These interesting little animals live underground, and throw up these mole-hills as they pass along under the surface. Perchance on one of our walks during this year we may have the good fortune to catch a mole above-ground, but it is not often that one sees this wary little animal in such a position. I have seen moles sometimes above the ground, but they are so active and clever that they can burrow underneath before one has time to reach the spot where they appeared.'

XI

MARCH—SECOND WEEK

A Robin's Strange Nest—Welcome Rain—The Lesser Celandine—The Tiny Gold-Crest

BEFORE we go for our eleventh walk this March morning, Stanley, I have a pleasant little surprise in store for you. Two days ago, on March 10, I was in my summer-house planting some seeds. I noticed a robin fly out as I entered, but did not pay much regard to this until I happened to require a box from a shelf. On reaching it down I noticed on the shelf a large collection of dead leaves, pieces of straw, and other materials. Knowing that I had cleared the shelf of rubbish not long since, I was prompted to look carefully at this heap of leaves, and what do you think my examination revealed?'

'I really cannot guess, Uncle.'

'I will show you. Come with me down the garden, and notice, as you pass along, how the crocuses are out in a blaze of splendour, and how many kinds of bulbs are now rapidly pushing their

FIG. 18.—BLACKTHORN.

FIG. 19.—COWSLIPS.

way through the ground. Here we are at the summer-house. Let me lift you up, so that you can look at this mass of leaves. There, now what can you see?'

'A nest, Uncle, a nest; what is it?'

'It is a robin's nest, almost ready to receive its freckled eggs. I want you to promise me that you will not interfere with this nest in any way, for the little robin has shown that it trusts us not to disturb it, and we will not on any account do so. The mild weather has tempted this particular pair of birds to start nest-building very early. There should be a clutch of four or five eggs in a few days' time. If you are a good boy you shall see the eggs, and the young speckled robins when they are hatched. Now we must be off to the woods, or our ramble to-day will be a very short one.'

Away we went across the fields, my little companion and I. March, so far, has not belied its name, and we have had many weathers. To-day, March 12, was a day of storm and sunshine, but the rain was most welcome, as for some time past there have been rumours of a severe drought during the coming summer, unless we had rain. Now the rain has come, and in torrents, too, so that the farmers and other tillers of the soil are very pleased.

'Notice by this hedge-side what a variety of

wild plants are forcing their way above ground. There is the cuckoo pint, or wild arum; there is the hedge parsley, with its fresh, green, fern-like leaves; here is the goosegrass, or cleavers; and here, a little further on, is the cow parsnip and the garlic mustard.'

'How do you remember the names of all these plants, Uncle?'

'Simply by continuous study of wild life throughout each year, Stanley. A naturalist's year commences on January 1, and ends on December 31, and, if you study Nature year by year, you soon learn the names of plants, and birds, and trees, and insects, and other wild tenants of the countryside. But our work does not stop there; we not only want to be able to name them, we want also to learn something of their interesting lives and habits. Now, this morning, I want to find a blossom of the lesser celandine. Keep your eyes well open, look for some small glossy-green leaves and a yellow flower.'

'I see one, Uncle, here! Oh! it is only a buttercup!'

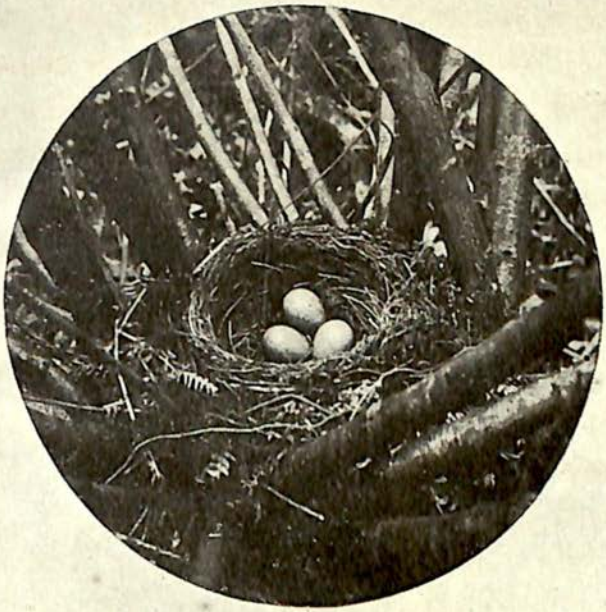
'No, it is not a buttercup at all; that which you have so quickly found is really the lesser celandine. It is misleading to call it buttercup, for there are quite a number of different species of plants which go by that name. So that in future I want you to call this plant the lesser celandine.

There is another plant, which flowers later in the year, which is called the greater celandine. This latter, however, belongs to an entirely different family of plants from the lesser celandine. The lesser species belong to what botanists call the order Ranunculaceæ, or Ranunculus family. This is the lowest order of flowering plants, whilst the greater celandine belongs to the Papaveraceæ, or Poppy family. The green hellebore, which I showed you on our last walk, belongs to the same family as the lesser celandine, and so does the anemone, which we shall see in flower in a few weeks' time.

'Ah, here we have reached an open space in the wood. The woodmen have been busy cutting away the underwood, and see how neatly they have tied up the wood in bundles; some will be used for pea- and bean-sticks, those poles for stakes, and so on. Just look on yonder bundle of faggots, what mouse-like little bird is that? I can hardly follow the wary bird in his deft movements; he manages to hide himself at almost every turn. I have him now; it is, as I suspected, a golden-crested wren. Look at him, Stanley, through my glass.'

'Oh! what a pretty little bird, Uncle. I can see his golden crest every now and then, and his greenish-yellow coat. How very tiny he is, Uncle.'

'Yes, the gold-crest is a very small bird, and it is wonderful how it manages to eke out an existence during hard weather. It is not only the smallest inhabitant of British birdland, but it is the most diminutive bird in Europe!'



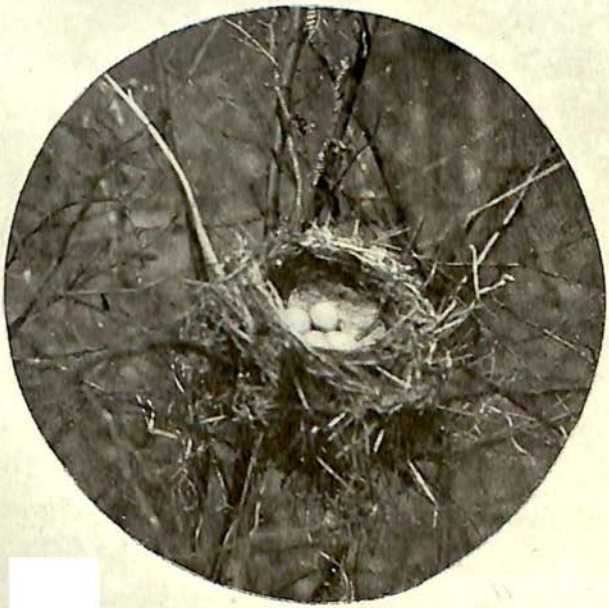


FIG. 20.—NEST AND EGGS OF BLACKBIRD.
FIG. 21.—NEST AND EGGS OF SONG THRUSH.

XII

MARCH—THIRD WEEK

Sunbeams—The Glow of Spring—'Birds' Eyes'—The Sallow Tree—A Chorus of Music—Rookland

'THIS, Stanley, March 19, is undoubtedly the first real day of spring. How beautiful the warm sunshine is! See, as we ramble through this favourite belt of woodland, how the warm rays of the sun penetrate the still leafless trees and bushes and reach the undergrowth. Later on, when the trees and bushes have acquired their leafy dress, the welcome sunshine will not be able to penetrate underneath, so that it is necessary that the life-giving sunbeams should be taken advantage of now, in the early spring.

'The wild hyacinths, cuckoo pint, purple orchis, bugle, ground ivy, yellow loosestrife, primroses, anemones, wood sorrel, and other woodland-loving plants, are storing up the sunbeams, so to speak, to enable them to blossom forth in all their beauty later in the year. True, there are a good many primroses in flower even now, doubtless owing to

the invigorating sunshine reaching them in their leaf-strewn beds, but when the whole woodland is carpeted with the pale yellow flowers, many trees and bushes will be leafed, and the sunshine will not reach them. Notice how green the whole bed of the wood is now, as compared with what it was a few short weeks ago. The death-like look of winter solitude and bareness has been transformed into the glow of early spring. Here is the strawberry-leaved potentil, or barren strawberry, opening its little white petals; and just on the edge of the wood there you will observe a large patch of most beautiful sky-blue flowers. What do you think these are?'

'I call them birds'-eyes, Uncle.'

'Yes, that is their local name, but we want in our rambles to call things by their proper names. The correct name of this very lovely plant is germander speedwell, or veronica. There are several species to be met with in our walks, which I shall point out to you as their flowering period arrives. This one, however, is quite the earliest of them all to open its welcome blossoms to the March sunshine. You remember, a week or two ago, I pointed out to you the silver buds on the sallow tree. Just look at that self-same tree this morning, and notice what a transformation has taken place; the silver buds have disappeared, and now the tree is one mass of golden. Let me pluck a small piece for you to examine closely. Now, this is the

SALLOW CATKINS.
(Male (or Staminate) Blossoms.)

WILLOW CATKINS.
(Female (or Pistillate) Blossoms.)

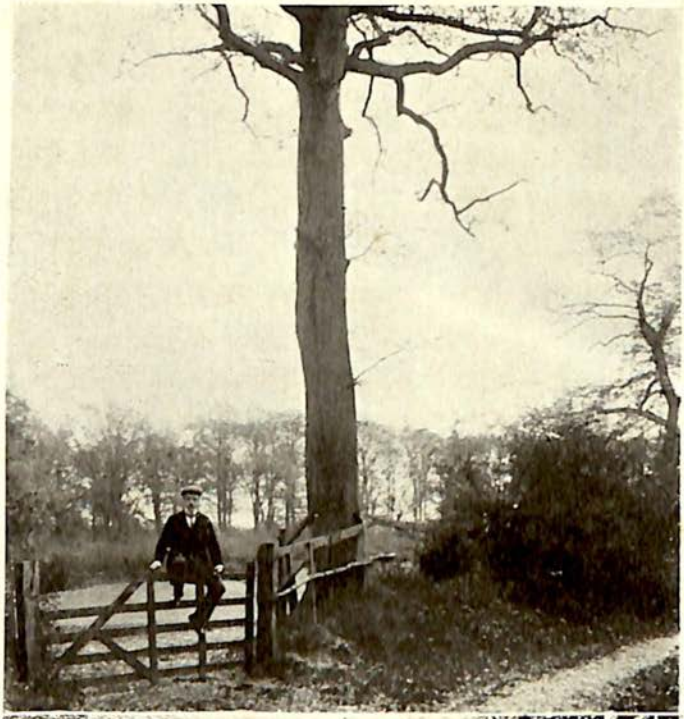


FIG. 22.—THE OLD LANE.
FIG. 23.—EARLY SPRING.

male blossom of the sallow, and you will remember I told you that the male and female—unlike the nut-hazel—grow on separate trees. Just see how the stem is crowded with stamens. It is the delicate golden anthers which give the tree such a pleasing colour.'

'What a lot of stamens there are, Uncle, on each twig! Why are there so many?'

'Because, this being a wind- as well as an insect-fertilized tree, it is necessary that there should be an abundance of pollen, to make sure of some, at least, being carried to the female tree somewhere in the vicinity, so that fertilization may be effected. Peer through the branches there, and you will observe another sallow tree.'

'I see it, Uncle. But it isn't nearly so pretty as the tree we first saw. It doesn't seem to be in proper flower yet.'

'I am not surprised at your remark, for this second tree, as compared with the first, creates a poor impression. Yet it will never be more pleasing than it is now. This second tree carries the female blossoms only, which, of course, lack the beautiful golden anthers of the male blossoms. Neither tree has yet arrived at maturity. When the anthers burst, this male blossom will be still more beautiful, and then we will shake the branches and release some of the pollen, just as we did to the nut-hazel some weeks ago. The hazel—that is,

the male blossom—looks very ragged now, but its work has, let us hope, been accomplished.

'In the bird-world you cannot fail to notice the great chorus of music this fine March morning. Blackbird, hedge-sparrow, song-thrush, wren, great and blue tits, and soaring larks are all in jubilant voice, happy at the approach of another spring-time, and heralding it by a wonderful outburst of sweet music. Listen also to the competition between the male chaffinches. How nice to hear their pleasing songs again after the mere "pink, pink, pink" of the winter months; and how gay the male bird is, now that the courting season is near at hand. I can hear, too, in the distance, the first spring notes of the yellow bunting; and look through the trees at the rookery yonder! What a commotion there is in rook-land! The birds are all busy at their nests, revelling in the sunshine. Never at any other season of the year do the rooks utter such a variety of notes as now. See how they place their nests at the end of some of the thinnest branches, to ensure preservation from nest-robbers. Look through my glasses at some of the birds on the outer trees, and notice the bald patch of skin behind the beak. This at once distinguishes the rook from the crow, the latter being feathered right down to the base of the beak. There are other differences, too, of which I must tell you on some other occasion.'

XIII

MARCH—FOURTH WEEK

The Greenfinch—Seed Distribution—The Blackthorn—The Hawthorn—The Horse Chestnut

'LISTEN, this morning, Stanley, for the song of the greenfinch, or green linnet, as the bird is more often called in the country. These last few days I have noticed this finch acquiring his spring song, and watched him near my garden uttering all sorts of curious notes. There goes one, singing as he proceeds. I have long reckoned the greenfinch as one of the very few song-birds who sing whilst on the wing. You will notice, if you listen carefully, that he is not a great songster by any means, but what he lacks in his vocal powers he makes amends for in his plumage. A typical male greenfinch in his best spring livery of green and yellow is a sight to behold. See, there is one perched on the pliant branches of that silver birch tree on which the catkins are now showing. Notice how the sunlight

catches him, and how it lights up his body. Isn't he a fine bird?'

'Yes, I like the colours of his feathers, Uncle; but what an ugly look he has about his head.'

'That is due to his massive beak. This gives the greenfinch, likewise his near relative the hawfinch, a somewhat ungainly appearance. That strong beak of his, however, is of great service to him, especially when he is extracting the seeds of the sunflower in the autumn and winter. The seeds are securely packed in the sunflower's head, and require forcible ejectment. Have you noticed during our rambles how very low the blackbird flies, when we disturb the bird along a hedgerow or in the woodland? The song-thrush also follows suit, but not to such a great extent. Here in the very heart of this tangled wood is a tree of the flowering currant, bursting into blossom.'

'Oh, Uncle! how funny for this tree to be here; we have one like it in our garden at home.'

'Yes, it does seem strange that one should find these garden trees, shrubs and plants in the wild greenwood, but on reflection we can easily account for their presence. Here, for instance, are some gooseberry and red-currant bushes. The probability is that the birds carried off some gooseberries and currants from a neighbouring orchard or garden, and brought the luscious fruit here during a dry summer to enjoy their meal in peace and

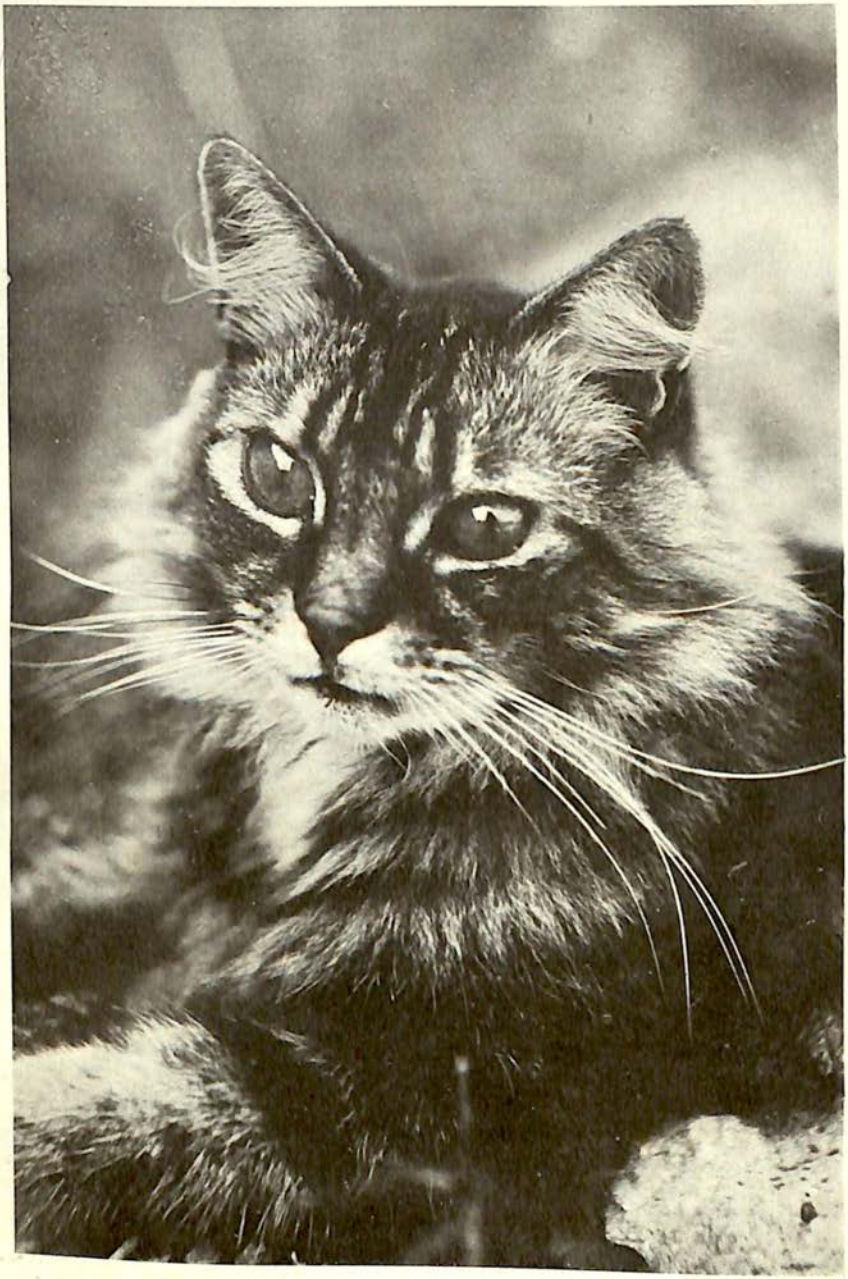


FIG. 24.—A FINE CAT.

solitude. Perhaps some of the fruit dropped from their mouths as they hurried along; then, again, seeds often pass uninjured through a bird's body and germinate. Seeds, too, are often borne by the wind — winged-seeds especially — Nature's wonderful parachutes, which I mentioned to you some weeks ago when giving you a little object-lesson on the dandelion. So, you see, there are many ways in which seeds of trees, shrubs and plants which grow in gardens get distributed along the countryside, and even into the heart of the woodland glade.

'Do you notice how green this hawthorn tree is, though we find it in this sheltered cover of the wood? It is almost fully leafed, whilst outside the wood the buds are only just showing. To all appearances there will be a wealth of may blossom for the May girls on the first of May, and plenty of milk-white bloom wherewith to decorate the May-pole and crown the May-queen.'

'Here is another hawthorn bush quite green, Uncle.'

'No, you are mistaken this time; that is a blackthorn bush, not a hawthorn. The blackthorn blooms earlier than the hawthorn, has much smaller flowers, and its fruit is the beautiful purple sloe; whereas the fruit of the hawthorn is, as you know, red, and called haws. The blackthorn never makes such a brave show as its near relative, but for

all that, early in the spring the milky whiteness of a blackthorn bush is one of the fairest floral sights of the countryside.

'See how the buds on the horse-chestnut tree have progressed these last few days. Let me pull a branch down for you to look at closely. How beautifully the leaves are packed tightly together, and notice this sticky secretion which acts as a shield, during hard weather, to the precious contents within. Here is the wild cherry in full blossom and fairly well leafed. Notice that there is more blossom than leaf so far—Nature is exceedingly eager to reproduce herself. Just across the field yonder, look at that willow plantation, and feast your little observant eyes upon the softness of the colour of the yellow catkins. Isn't it a fair spring sight to behold? And the picture is completed by the dark, leafless trees which rise beyond the plantation with such pleasing effect.'

FIG. 25.—BY THE WATER SIDE.

XIV

APRIL—FIRST WEEK

The Chiff Chaff—The Wheatear—Primroses—The Cowslip—The Fresh Green of the Trees

A FEW days ago, to be exact, on March 26, Stanley and I heard in a secluded little copse the welcome notes of the chiff chaff, which had, doubtless, only a few hours previously landed once again in dear old England from the shores of the Mediterranean, where it spends the winter months. Some of these birds, however, have been found during recent years in Cornwall all through the twelve months, so that in future we shall almost have to add this delightful little bird friend to our list of resident species.

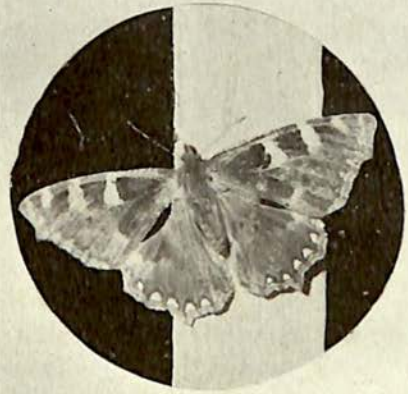
The chiff chaff is one of the very earliest heralds of spring, and its two notes, from which it takes its name, are eagerly listened for by bird students before March is out. It is an engaging little species, and resorts to the topmost branches of the tallest trees. It lives entirely upon insects, which, on March 26, I observed it catching on

the wing, flycatcher-like. Although almost exclusively resorting to tall trees—particularly oaks—it nests upon the ground. It makes a dome-shaped nest, which it artfully conceals in a grassy bank, the structure being lined with a great profusion of feathers.

To-day, April 2, Stanley and I had the pleasure of chronicling the arrival of another summer bird visitor from across the seas; and a rare bird to observe in this part of Hertfordshire. My little companion and I chanced to cross a waste piece of ground this afternoon, and observed two peculiar-looking brown birds, each displaying a very prominent white rump when flying. Putting the glasses upon the bird, we were enabled to see the conspicuous eye-stripe. We found it to be the wheatear, a summer visitor only to the British Isles, spending the winter in Western and Northern Africa, in Persia, or in Northern India.

'Now, Stanley, this morning we will hie away to the sheltered woodland, and see if we can gather a nice posy of primroses. The weather has been of the nicest these last few days, and the pale primrose of early spring should soon be at its best.'

How the little companion of my rambles enjoyed himself plucking a nice nosegay of primroses, and how specially delighted he was to think



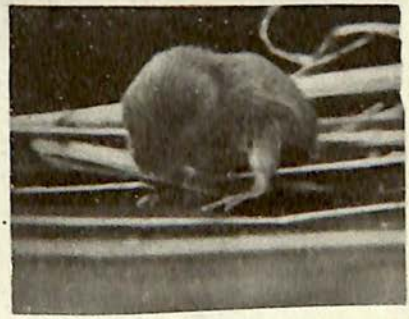


FIG. 26.—PRIMROSES.

FIG. 27.—THE HEDGEHOG WAKES FROM HIS WINTER SLEEP.

FIG. 28.—A STRAY TORTOISESHELL BUTTERFLY.

29.—FIELD VOLE FEEDING.

that he could pluck them here in this rigid game-preserving district without being warned off by the keeper!

'Oh, Uncle, they are just lovely! And look here, I have found a cowslip. Isn't the golden-yellow of the cowslip beautiful as compared with what I have heard you call the sulphur-yellow of the primrose?'

'Yes, that stray blossom of the cowslip is our first record of the plant in flower for the present season, and I am delighted to observe that you are using your vigilant pair of eyes to such advantage. Notice that, whereas the primrose revels in a secluded copse, and grows mostly in clusters, the cowslip disdains the woodland and seeks the companionship of the grassy field-banks. Shortly, too, we should find the oxlip, a plant which throws a flowering stalk like the cowslip, and has the same beautiful golden-yellow flowers, but almost the size of the primrose blossom.

'What a number of trees are now putting on their summer dresses, too! Soon the whole countryside will be decked with a mass of delicious fresh green. The hawthorn is leafing rapidly almost everywhere; here is the blackthorn in leaf and flower; there is the sycamore in full leaf; and notice how that belt of larch firs shows greenish here and there. See the catkins on the silver birch; observe this horse-chestnut tree by the

keeper's cottage, in open leaf, being more sheltered than its fellows in the open, which have not as yet unrolled their leaves.

'Daisies now stud the fields with their tiny discs of flowers, and golden dandelions are daily becoming more plentiful. We see and hear so much now in the bird, plant, and insect worlds, that it is difficult in one short walk and talk to deal with one hundredth part of what we see and hear.'

FIG. 30.—A FOX CUB.

FIG. 31.—AN APRIL SCENE.

XV

APRIL—SECOND WEEK

The Coming of the Birds—The Tree Pipit—The Sand Martin—The Willow Wren—Birds' Nests

'ALTHOUGH it is such a wet and dismal morning, Stanley, we must have a walk with Nature to-day, because from now until the end of April many bird visitors from across the seas will reach our shores and distribute themselves over our country. It is important, therefore, that we should look and listen for the first arrivals whenever opportunity offers, and even if the weather is the reverse of pleasant we must be out and about. Often on a wet, dismal morning, I have listened to the song of the nightingale again for the first time, but to-day, April 9, we are hardly likely to hear its lovely song, as it does not usually make its appearance in Hertfordshire until about the 14th of the month.'

'And where does the nightingale go during our winter, Uncle?'

'To Africa; and isn't it wonderful to reflect

for a moment how the birds find their way upon their pathless journeyings? Yet they do so, and often return year after year to exactly the same spots. Just look on the outer branches of that oak-tree, for instance, and you will espy a lark-like bird at this very moment. There, he has flown off and is ascending into the air. Now, watch him; he will not fly away, but come down through the air like a shaftless arrow when he has reached a certain height, singing all the time. This is the tree pipit, another summer visitor which winters in Africa, Persia, and India; and what is apparently the same bird returns every April to the same tree. At any rate, for several years past I have known one of these birds to frequent this particular oak-tree. You like its song, do you?'

'Yes, I think it is a lovely songster, Uncle, and it reminds me very much of the song of the skylark, which I know is a great favourite of yours.'

'Your ears have not deceived you. The song of the tree pipit, or titlark, as he is often called in the country, is very much like that of the skylark, but the bird perching on a tree and its fascinating song-flight at once distinguish it from "the scorner of the ground." Although resorting to trees, and spending a good deal of its time in the air like the lark, the tree pipit nests upon the

ground, and later in the season we must see if we can find its nicely made home.

'These past few days, Stanley, whilst you have been sleeping snugly in your bed, I have been out in the woods, and many times have gathered a fresh posy of primroses before breakfast. I first heard and saw the tree pipit on April 5, in an ash-tree, where I always see one of these birds in the season of the year, and yesterday, April 9, I saw three or four little sand martins revelling in the April sunlight. The mouse-coloured back immediately distinguishes this industrious little bird from the house martin and the swallow.

'Listen, I hear another summer migrant! Yes, there is the willow wren only just arrived in its favourite oak-wood. Hark to its cheery little song, the piccolo solo in the orchestra of Nature. See the blithe little herald of summer picking his way through the branches, snatching hither and thither after insects. Doesn't he look a frail creature? Yet he has safely crossed the sea in his perilous journey from Africa or Persia.

'See how the lesser periwinkle is in beautiful flower. Notice how the blue blossoms contrast with this fine patch of wood anemones, and the sulphur blossoms of the primrose. Isn't the whole countryside getting fresh and green since we first commenced our rambles? From now until late in the autumn we shall see and hear such a lot

of interesting things, that our note-book will become crowded with notes, with only a few of which we shall be able to deal.

'The thrush music is a treat indeed, and soon after it was light these last few days the whole woodland has rung with this bird's much-varied and liquid song. One particular bird has attracted my attention very much, for his notes were very rich, powerful, and shrill. Morning after morning I heard him sing, and he seemed to say "wet-week, wet-week, wet-week." Sure enough to-day, the commencement of another week, is very wet and dismal.

'I have also noticed, in my early morning rambles, what a large number of rabbits may be seen as compared with later in the day. Several times I have been amused by these interesting animals sitting in the sunshine, sunning their little dappled and furry bodies, their eyes glistening like diamonds. And do you know that this last week I have discovered just one hundred birds' nests containing eggs or young birds? Some young song-thrushes and ring-doves have already left their family nurseries; some young blackbirds and robins are hatched, and I thought of these most anxiously two days ago, when in the early morning we experienced a very severe snowstorm.

'Now we must close our fifteenth talk, and

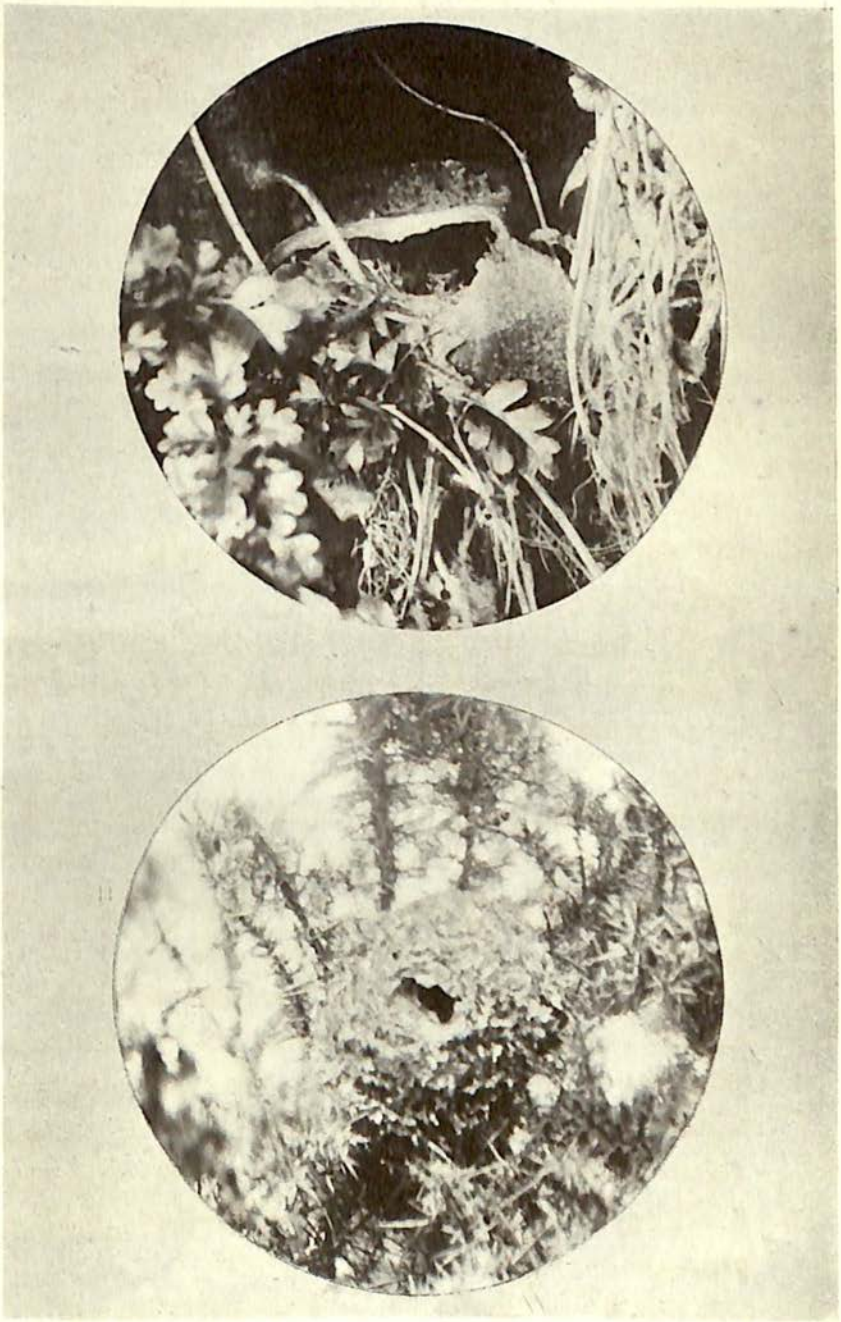


FIG. 32.—FEMALE ROBIN SITTING ON NEST IN OLD CAN.
FIG. 33.—NEST OF LONG-TAILED TIT.

I hope by the time our sixteenth ramble takes place we may be able to say—

"'The cuckoo and the nightingale
Full merrily do sing,
And with their pleasant roundelays
Bid welcome to the spring.'"

XVI

APRIL—THIRD WEEK

A Carpet of Primroses—The Greater Stitchwort—The Greater Whitethroat—The Nightingale—The Cuckoo

'ALTHOUGH, Stanley, we found the first primrose in flower early in February, you will notice that even now it will be a few days before the flowers are at the height of their beauty. During the first week or two of April we have experienced some very severe frosts, and I have plucked primroses on many occasions in the early morning recently, when they have been quite crystallized with frost. These frosts, then, have set back the hands of Nature's wonderful clock—that is, so far as the primroses are concerned, at any rate—and hence we now find the beautiful sulphur-yellow blossoms quite carpeting the belt of woodland where we are wandering, two months after the date when they first commenced to bloom. Isn't it a lovely floral display? So gorgeous and yet so tasteful, so captivating and yet so simple!

'And did you notice, too, as we came through

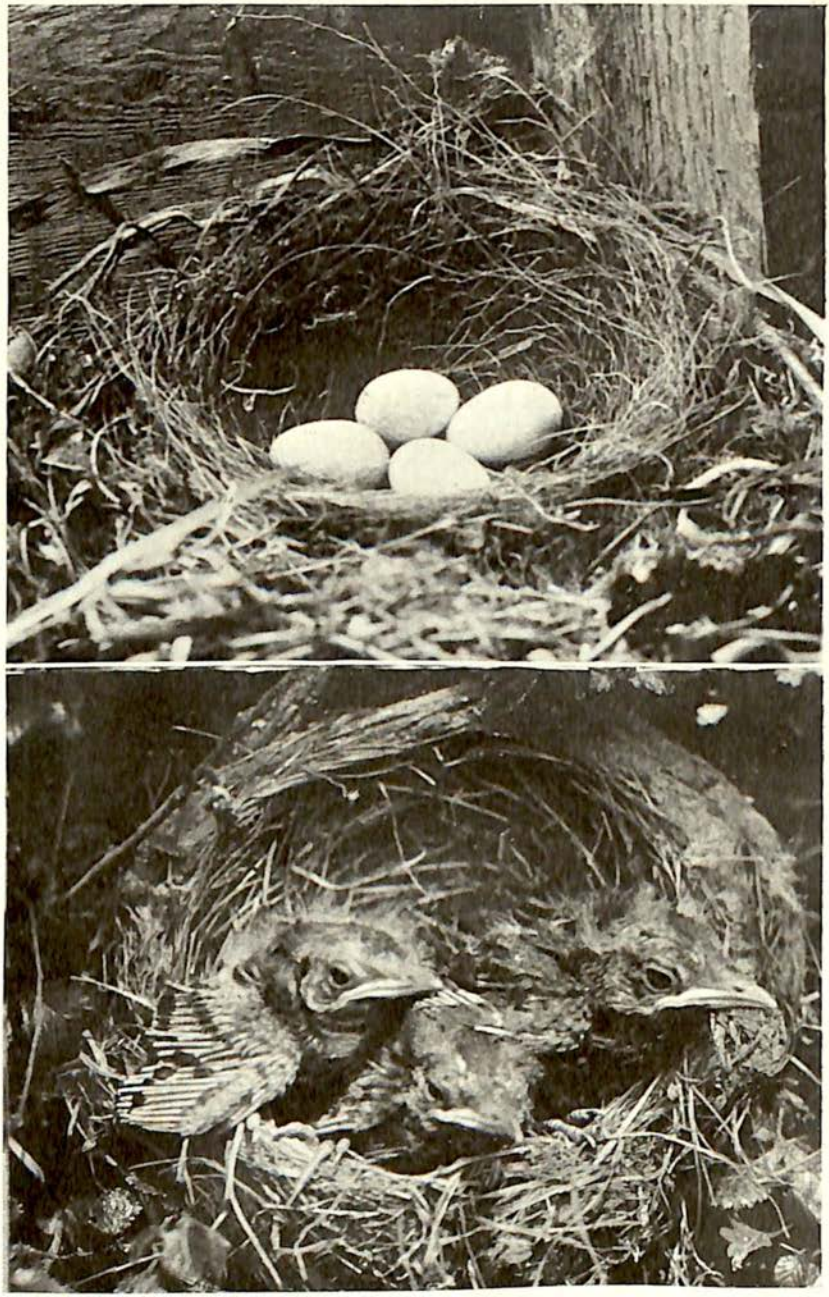


FIG. 34.—ROBIN'S NEST AND EGGS IN SUMMER HOUSE.
FIG. 35.—YOUNG BLACKBIRDS.

the field leading to the wood, the great mass of golden dandelions shining like rosettes of fiery gold in the April sunlight? Haven't you and I seen a great change in dandelion-land since we started our walks and talks? You remember, it was in the cold, dark days of January when we observed the first dandelion disc opening its florets as a bright little herald of approaching spring. Now the dandelions have literally studded the soft, delicious green of the meadows with flaring gold, and we haven't noticed the change until to-day, for so many other things in Nature's story of the year have attracted and held our attention.

'It is remarkable to notice how the whole face of Nature changes when spring has once set in. I have seen my favourite woodland so transformed as almost completely to deceive me with regard to my whereabouts. For instance, I have watched the first piece of dog's mercury push through the woodland bed in early spring. Eventually, the whole of the undergrowth has been made up of the fresh green of this common plant, and it then seemed hard to realize that in the very early days of spring I had seen the first plant work its crafty head through the earth. I have watched other plants and trees in the same way, and it is most interesting to observe the changes which thus take place in Nature's year.

'Now notice that along this hedgerow, where

the sun just kisses the bankside nicely, there are a few white starry heads of the greater stitchwort showing; as also a piece or two of hedge parsley; and the garlic mustard will very soon open its white blossoms. All three plants throw white flowers, and in a few weeks' time the lanes of England will be filled with milk-white blossom from these and other plants.'

'Uncle, that first flower you showed me, the greater stitchwort, we call Billy's buttons. Which is the proper name, please?'

'Call the plant in future the greater stitchwort, as that is the English name by which it is generally known. Billy's buttons is only a local name.'

'Now we must devote the remainder of our walk and talk, this morning, to our friends the birds; but just observe, before watching and listening to our feathered companions, that small garden white butterfly upon the wing, a sure ambassador of spring. There, from that favourite ash-tree, ascends the tree pipit, or titlark; along that sunlit hedgerow I saw, just now, a greater whitethroat, called locally hay-tit and nettle creeper. I want you in future, however, to refer to this bird as the whitethroat, and be particular to qualify it by mentioning greater whitethroat, as there is a smaller species known as the lesser whitethroat.

'See, there he goes. Watch him dancing

almost over the top of the hedgerow and listen to his snatchy little song.

'From that dense thicket yonder I hear the strains of the nightingale. Listen!'

'I thought the nightingale only sang at night, Uncle, when all other birds, except owls, were at rest?'

'A good many people think the same, Stanley, but they are quite wrong. The nightingale, during its song period, sings throughout the livelong day, almost from early morning to dewy eve, and on through the lone watches of the night. There, we are quite near him now. Listen to his mellow, fluty notes. Don't go too close to him, as his song is softened by distance; indeed, when too near the bird, the notes are sometimes quite ear-splitting. I can spot him; look on that fast-greening hazel tree; there he sits, preening his feathers, now singing, now snatching at an insect passing near by. Look at the renowned songster through my glasses; notice his lustrous eyes, sombre plumage, and brickdust-red back and tail.'

'I never saw a nightingale before. Oh! what a plain-looking bird.'

'You alone are not disappointed on seeing the bird, Stanley, and very few people know the nightingale by sight. Although a plain-looking species, as you rightly remark, it is a beautifully built bird, and its soft colours—brown, grey, and

brickdust-red—are really beautiful, even if much less gaudy than the colours of many other British birds. I would remind you that birds which possess songs are not, as a rule, brilliant in plumage; those which have gaudy plumage do not generally utter what may be termed a song. On one of our rambles we must find time to have a further chat upon the subject of the songs of birds and their plumage, and the effect they have at the time of the happy days of courtship.'

Just as we left the wood we heard the welcome call of the wandering cuckoo, and, outside the woodland on the damp bankside, we found the first delicate blossoms of the cuckoo-flower; both the bird and the flower were duly recorded in our note-book for the first time during this year on the same date—a fitting termination to our sixteenth Nature talk. The cuckoo-flower is so called because it usually blooms when the cuckoo first makes its appearance. Our experience to-day proves how very appropriately this plant is named.

FIG. 36.—DAISIES.

XVII

APRIL—FOURTH WEEK

The Poets and Nature—The Skylark's Song—Bluebells—Fly-Catchers—The Blackcap

'TO-DAY, Stanley, April 23, is the anniversary of the death of William Shakespeare, the great and eminent man of letters, of whom all British men and women are justly proud. He was born in the year 1564 and died on April 23, 1616. Born of humble parents, Shakespeare became exceedingly learned, and to-day his works have probably a larger sale than almost any other book published in the English language, the Bible, that Book of books—God's Own Word of Truth—always excepted. I particularly mention this day as the anniversary of Shakespeare's death, because, included in his beautiful writings, there are so many references to Nature. You will remember I have quoted Shakespeare's exquisite reference to the primrose as—

'"Primrose, first-born child of Ver,
Merry Springtime's harbinger."

'There are many other delightful references to flowers and birds in Shakespeare's works, especially that about the nightingale, and, although this great English writer sometimes went astray in his allusions to Natural History, he is not alone in this respect by any means. Many of the Nature poets—Tennyson in particular—were very accurate in dealing with Nature's realm, but some have fallen into grievous error. For instance, I have just been reading a beautiful "April Allegro" by Robert Richardson, and in the course of his verses this poet has written about the skylark thus—

"'Then at last one April dawn,
High above the glimmering lawn!
While the first faint fires are scattering the dark;
Lo, I hear a buoyant note
On the dewy air afloat,
And I catch the first fine preludes of the lark;
Then I know, ah, then I know,
When I hear that glad song flow,
That the sweet of all the year
In a little will be here,
And the spring is coming, coming back again!
And the spring is coming, coming to the northern home again,
To the weary hearts that wait her in her English home again."

Now, this is a very beautiful April allegro, but the poet, in singing of the skylark's buoyant note, "at last one April dawn," leads the reader of his verse to suppose that the lark sings first during April! Even you know that we have

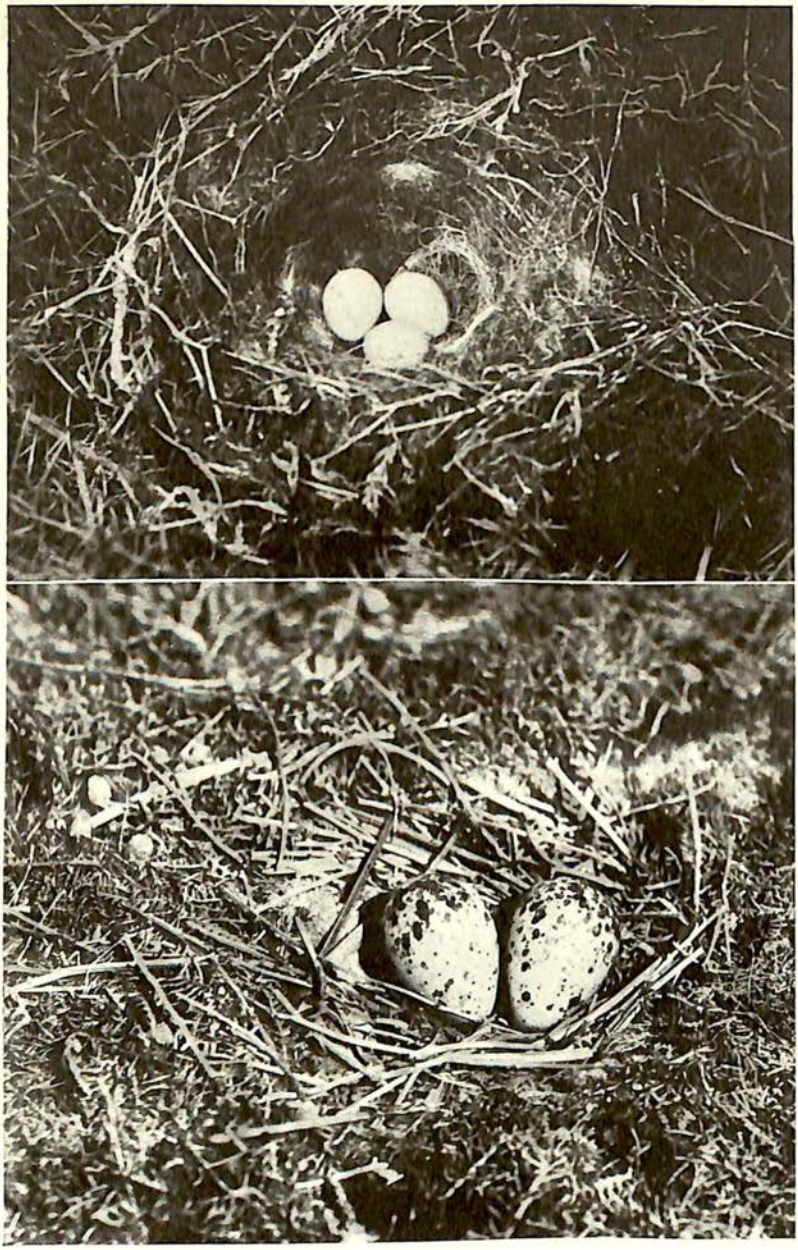


FIG. 37.—NEST AND EGGS OF HEDGE SPARROW.
FIG. 38.—NEST AND EGGS OF LAPWING

listened to the continuous song of this bird for many weeks past, and the poet unconsciously shows that he did not use his ears to advantage during February and March, or even towards the end of January.

'Notice to-day how the wild hyacinths, or bluebells, are carpeting the woodlands with their fresh green leaves, and also that there are quite a number of the plants already in flower. Given some warm weather, this favourite rambling ground of ours will soon be one sea of blue, and the air filled with the sweet scent from the bluebells' blossoms. See, too, the cowslips are lighting up many a hedgerow and pasture field with their bright colour, but one notes with reluctance the fading of the primrose.

'Primrose-day, April 19, has come and gone, and, as you will remember we found the first blossom early in February, it is only to be expected that these flowers should soon be on the decline. There is still a fine floral show, however, and only a day or two ago I saw an acre and a half of woodland so covered with primroses and cuckoo flowers that one could not pitch a marble without hitting a flower! Never in all my experience have I seen such a floral sight along the country-side, and I shall not readily forget the wonderful display of the pale, sulphur-yellow blossoms on a recent April morning.

'Just watch that willow wren catching insects on the wing like a flycatcher, and listen now and again to its pleasing little song.'

'Shall we see a flycatcher to-day, Uncle?'

'No, we are not likely to see one until early in May. The flycatcher is one of our latest summer visitors from across the seas, and is such an inconspicuous bird that it is often overlooked. You will, however, be much charmed by its interesting habits later on, when we shall hope to watch this eminently useful bird catching insects on the wing.'

'Does it sing, Uncle?'

'Not to any extent. It belongs mostly to a silent species. There are two kinds of flycatchers in our country during the summer, the pied and the spotted species. The former is a comparatively rare bird, but the latter is much commoner, and we are sure to locate this latter species during our walks and talks.

'There is a blackcap singing now; listen to its bubbling warble, and its beautiful flute-like notes. You will probably consider that its song is very similar to that of the greater whitethroat, but the notes of the blackcap are sweeter, and not nearly so harsh and jerky. The male bird has a black cap, from which it acquires its name; the head of the female is ash-coloured.'

FIG. 39.—THE COMING OF SPRING.

XVIII

APRIL—FIFTH WEEK

The Willow Wren's Song—Courting in Birdland—The Puffin's Attractions and his Wedding

'APRIL has sped away at all too quick a pace, Stanley. It hardly seems possible that to-day is the last day of the month, and that to-morrow is May-day. This reminds me, too, that May 1 is the anniversary of the death of John Dryden, the poet, and, as you are so fond of poetry, it will be appropriate if I recite to you Dryden's lines about the month of flowers upon which we are so shortly to enter.

'Sings the poet—

'"And soon the sun arose with beams so bright
That all the horizon laughed to see the joyous sight.
He with his tepid rays the rose renews,
And licks the drooping leaves, and dries the dews;
When Arcite left his bed, resolved to pay
Observance to the month of merry May.
A woodbine garland sought to crown his hair,
Then turned his face against the rising day,
And raised his face to welcome in the May.
For thee, sweet month, the groves green liveries wear,
If not the first, the fairest of the year;

For thee the graces lead the dancing hours,
And Nature's ready pencil paints the flowers.
When thy short reign is past, the feverish sun
The sultry tropic fears, and moves more slowly on."

'A month or so ago I fully anticipated that the hawthorn would be in nice blossom by May 1, but the cold April which we have experienced has considerably checked Nature's progress in the plant world, and the May-girls to-morrow will have to use the blossom of the blackthorn to decorate the May-pole and crown the May-queen.

'Here along this hedgerow the white petals of the hawthorn blossoms can just be seen, and a few days of nice warm weather would result in many an English hedgerow being festooned with milk-white flowers.

'The April month of the poet who wrote—

"Blow March winds, blow the clouds away,
That April with her sunny smile
May come, and all our hearts beguile,"

has disappointed us this year, for it has been cold and cheerless indeed. In spite of this, however, many species of plants—and vegetation in general—have made steady progress, and our summer bird visitors from across the seas have mostly arrived. They have—as a consequence of the cold weather—been remarkably silent; but yesterday, during a brief spell of sunshine, I was particularly struck with the sudden outburst of song. It is many

FIG. 40.—LISTENING TO THE CHIFF CHAFF.

years since I listened to so many willow wrens pouring out their cheerful little woodland solos, and the chiff chaffs seem more numerous than for several past seasons.

'A cold and cheerless April month is a great loss to the bird lover, for he invariably looks forward to the swelling chorus about mid-April, and the great outburst of bird music in Nature's orchestra during May and early June. When, however, April is unseasonable, and the birds mostly silent, May steals in apace, and the time for the singing of many species of birds has come and gone before one has time to realize it. You see, the songs of many birds are only uttered in the courtship season; the finest songster stands the best chance of wooing and winning a partner for the ensuing season.

'In the spring, then, birds' songs are heard at their best, for it is at this season that courtship rivalry is at its height. Birds which possess attractive plumage, like the kingfisher, the jay, many of the duck tribe, the yellow bunting, and others, endeavour to attract partners by means other than their songs. Birds of brilliant plumage do not, as a rule, possess good songs; they have, therefore, to woo and win their lady loves by the brilliance of their dress. Witness a cock pheasant showing off his brilliant plumage, and his spread-eagle tail, to an admiring hen pheasant a little

distance off! Along comes another cock bird, and the two males engage in a desperate combat for possession of the female. They fight like tigers; I have seen the feathers fly in all directions during one of these pheasant battles, and then have actually seen the victor stalking off with the female, who has played the part of a mere looker-on, while the vanquished male has hied away for the purpose of recovering from his courtship battle.

'I have observed, too, jays fighting like Kilkenny cats for the possession of a female partner; as also some of the tits. Many times, too, I have noticed how the chaffinches chase one another in their efforts to become possessors of an admiring female. Not only does the chaffinch endeavour to outvie his rival in the measure of his song, but he will strut down a lane or along the branches of a tree showing off his beautiful spring dress to perfection.

'Take a sea-bird, the puffin, called by the fishermen, the "sea parrot." What wonderful means does Mr. Puffin adopt to enable him to secure Miss Puffin unto himself! He possesses no song, neither is his plumage of a very attractive description. What, then, assists him in courting the attention of a female partner?'

'I should very much like to know, Uncle, for I am so interested in this bird talk.' It is, I think, one of the most interesting of any we have had.'

'Well, Mr. Puffin, at the approach of the breeding season, acquires a big sheath over his beak, reddish in colour; and, although in the opinion of man and woman this curious sheath makes the puffin look most peculiar and perhaps ungainly, it captivates Miss Puffin, and the end is achieved. It is interesting to relate that this sheath drops off after the nesting season; but by that time it has fulfilled its purpose. The male puffin who happens to grow the most brilliant sheath stands the best chance of becoming engaged. The admiring female shuffles up to her attentive lover, eyes him all over, makes up her mind that she will marry him, and forthwith the pair stalk off to prepare a nesting hole wherein to lay their one solitary white egg. The wedding ceremony is of short duration; the remaining puffins sit gazing with admiration at the newly wedded pair, and the roll of the ever-murmuring sea, and the shrieks and calls of many sea-birds, act as a sort of wedding march, giving a happy send-off to the newly married couple, Mr. and Mrs. Puffin. And still the world goes round!'

XIX

MAY—FIRST WEEK

In the Gloaming—The Nightingale's Song—The Pipistrelle Bat—The Long-eared Bat—The Owl—The Grasshopper Warbler.

INSTEAD of taking our nineteenth ramble during the daytime, Stanley and I decided to devote our attention to Nature towards the gloaming hour, just as the thrushes were making the whole woodland re-echo with soul-inspiring music. This was the thrushes' closing chorus, the last united outburst of song until the dawn of another summer's day.

'Chink, chink, chink'—the metallic note of the blackbird—was to be heard on almost every side, and as the night shades gathered, and we approached the woodland, my companion's hand tightened.

Nearing a favourite bramble and wild-rose copse, we heard the nightingale singing sweetly from its thickly embowered retreat. Its fluty notes rang out with much effect upon the still night air,

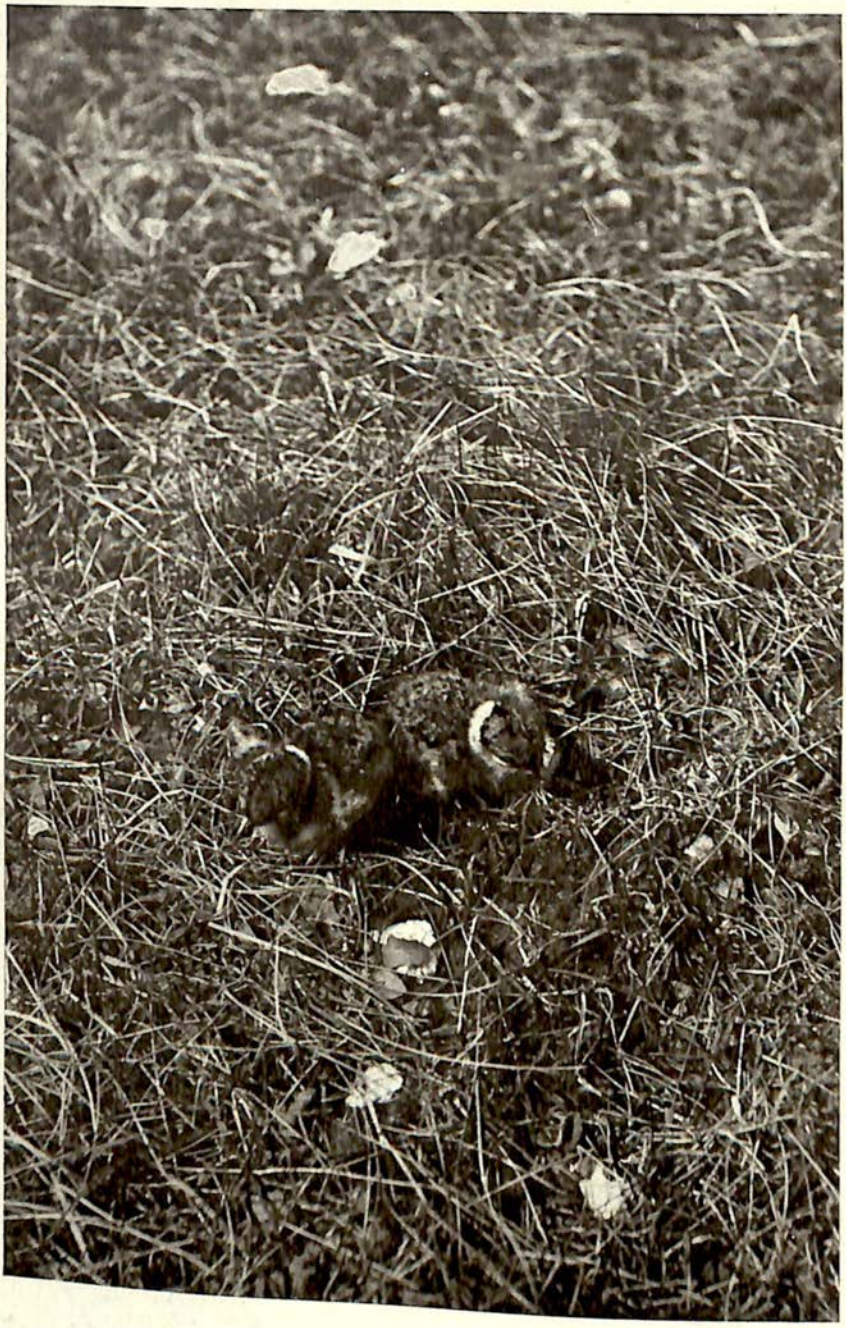


FIG. 41.—YOUNG LAPWINGS SQUATTING.

and at this time one can appreciate to the full the attractiveness of the song of this great feathered musician. The variety in its song is heard to best advantage when the night shadows deepen, and the finest notes fall upon the ear with far greater effect than when the song is heard in the daytime, mingled with the voices of other feathered tenants of the countryside.

The nightingale started singing this evening just before the thrushes ceased, and when thus listened to the notes do not fall so pleasantly upon the ear, nor appeal so strongly to us, as when the thrushes have closed their eyelids and left Philomel almost the sole occupant of the woodland choir. Almost the sole occupant, but not quite; for, as we stood listening to the nightingale, my companion was suddenly startled by a guttural note uttered by some bird not far away, and then a whirring of wings.

'Whatever was that?' ejaculated Stanley.

'That was a partridge uttering his parting love-song to his mate. We disturbed them courting, and the whirring of the wings tells us plainly that they have scampered to the far edge of the field for safety. There goes a little pipistrelle bat. Watch its dipping flight! Here he comes, darting hither and thither after insects. He is in a bee-line with us now. Look, he seems to be coming straight for us, but just before reaching us he

swerves to the left, and so avoids a violent collision with your Uncle's head. Here we are near the farmyard. There goes a bat, but a much larger one than the little species we saw just now. This is the long-eared or rabbit-eared bat. It is just light enough for you to discern the prominent ears of this species. Isn't he powerful upon the wing, and unerring in his flight? Now hawking in the air on tremulous wings, now scooping, rising, tumbling, swerving, falling.'

'Uncle, do bats lay eggs like birds?'

'A reasonable question for you to ask, Stanley, for perhaps not one person in a hundred is acquainted with the bat's place in the classification of animals. The bat is a mammal, not a bird, and a mammal is an animal which suckles its young. Not only is the bat a mammal—like you and I—but he is at the very head of the British mammalia, long before the foxes, wild cats, deer, birds, reptiles, or fish. The young are produced alive, and not from eggs, and the female shelters them under her membranous wings. Bats are furred, not feathered like birds, yet their wonderful wings enable them to fly in the air as you have seen them to-night. Now listen, for I hear from yonder woodland the mellow hoot of a tawny owl. The owl's busy time is just commencing, and the useful work which these birds perform is often unseen and unheard of. A day or two ago a keeper told me the owls had

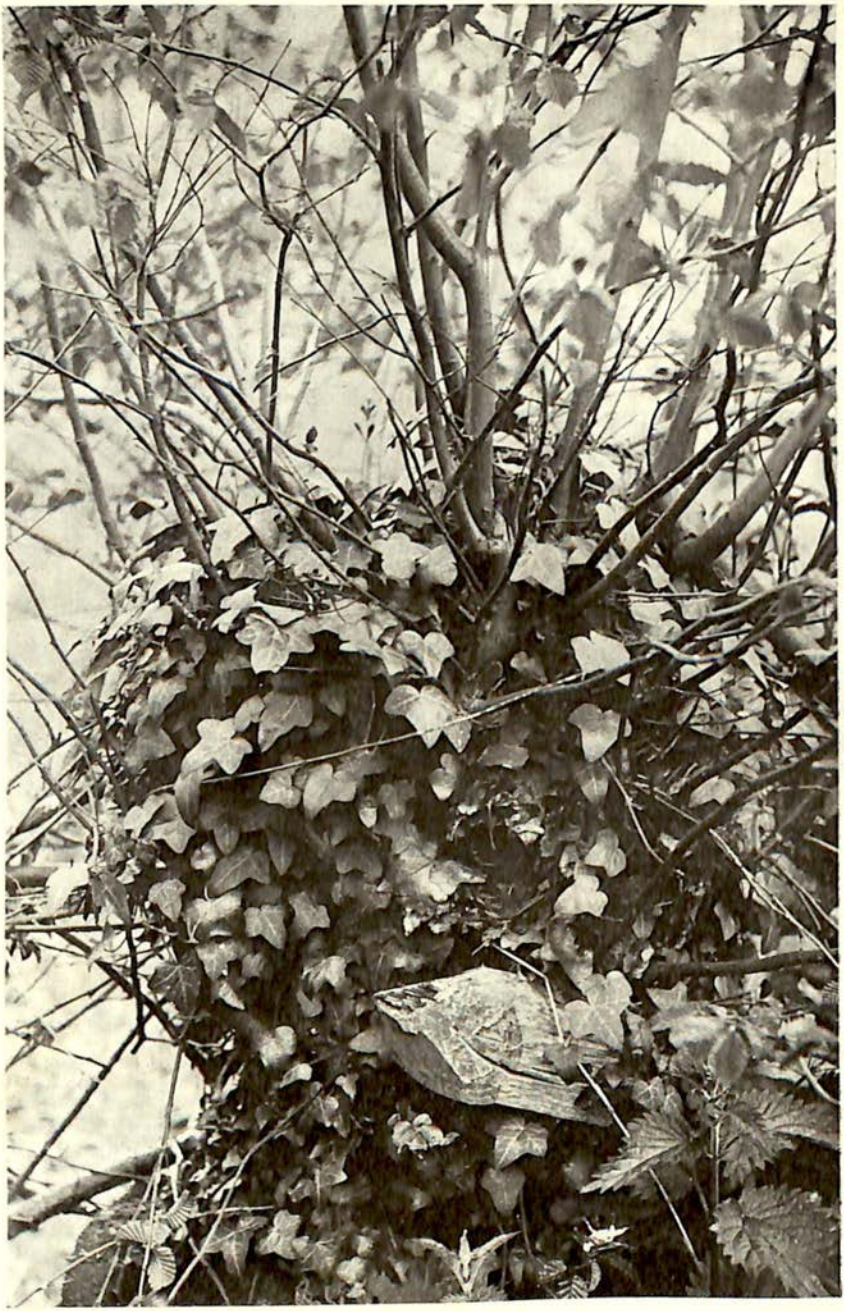


FIG. 42.—NEST OF COMMON WREN IN IVY.
(An example of protective colouration.)

greatly improved in his estimation, for he had found two full-grown rats in an owl's nest. Owls are undoubtedly the farmer's friends. They may do some damage to young game birds, but game preserving is unnecessary, and we must frame our opinions upon the greatest good for the greatest number.

'Listen now to that peculiar noise proceeding from the hedgerow. What do you think it is?'

'It sounds like a large grasshopper, Uncle.'

'And your ears have only slightly deceived you, my boy. Let us creep cautiously along the hedgerow and see if we can identify this strange musician. There, keep quite quiet, creep down, peer into the hedgerow, and you will observe a small bird just on the outskirts of that hawthorn bush.'

'And is it really a bird that makes such a strange noise, Uncle?'

'Yes, it is the song of the grasshopper warbler to which we are listening; once having heard the strange song you will not readily forget it. Hark at him now, and watch him. Now the song seems near at hand, then far away. This is caused by the bird rapidly turning his head from left to right and right to left. The song is somewhat like the noise produced by a large grasshopper, hence its name. It is a shy, recluse bird; it dips down into the undergrowth when lighted upon in the daytime,

and it is with the greatest difficulty that the nest can be located. We must spend an hour or two here some summer's morning and see if we cannot find the homestead of this interesting bird, yet another visitor to our shores from over the sea.'

XX

MAY—SECOND WEEK

Ferrets—The Scotch and Spruce Firs—A Canal Lock

MY nephew, although only a young boy, walked at least ten miles with me to-day, and thoroughly enjoyed himself the whole livelong day. We spent our day at a neighbouring gamekeeper's cottage, situate in the heart of the woodland, far from the haunts of men. And how my little companion enjoyed himself! First watching the ferrets, and wanting to fondle and caress the young ones; then lifting up the lids of the nest boxes, in which a great many hens were sitting on clutches of pheasants' eggs. He was specially interested, too, in the young ducklings, and made friends with all the dogs. And what a collection there were of the last-named animals—large, black, smooth-coated retrievers, whose pedigrees the keeper produced with great pride; terriers, spaniels, and other famous breeds known only to the dog-fancier.

What pleased Stanley most, however, was to

be able to gather, just outside the keeper's cottage, a bouquet of wild hyacinths, purple orchis, primroses, wood spurge, and pink campion. We were surprised to see such a bold show of primroses in the middle of May, but the cold weather had told its tale in the lingering blossoms of early spring. Stanley, too, was interested in a camel which one of the keeper's bairns produced from its storehouse of toys, and a couple of live tortoise-shell kittens.

In the immediate vicinity of the cottage there are a number of spruce and Scotch fir trees, reckoned to be amongst the very finest to be seen in England. Stanley busied himself, first collecting the small cones of the Scotch fir, and later the lengthy cones of the spruce. When we returned from a ramble my arms were tightly wrapped round a score of spruce fir cones, which the companion of my walks and talks was very anxious to carry home. The keeper's wife—a genial, good-natured Irishwoman; I would that there were more like her, a model mother, and a devoted wife—thought otherwise, however, and when we took our departure, and Stanley inquired for his fir cones, he was told that they had been burned upon the wood fire!

And what an appetite the little chap had out there in that wild fastness; yet we were within twenty miles of Charing Cross! And a good appetite

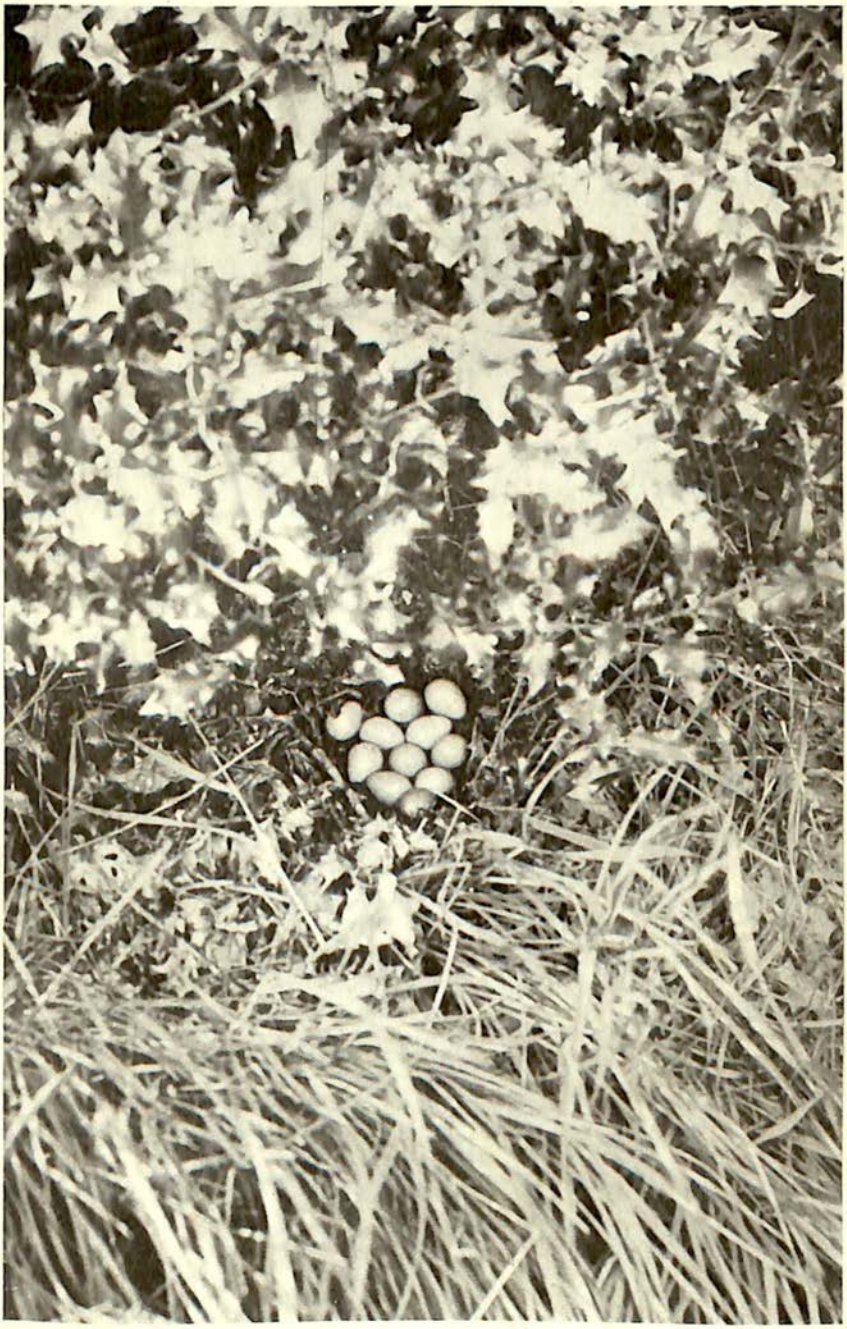


FIG. 43.—NEST AND EGGS OF PARTRIDGE.

was not his alone, for to me the roast beef of Old England never tasted more tender and sweet, nor the greens so asparagus-like, nor the potatoes so floury! Why? Because our hostess was a splendid cook, and the enjoyment of a meal depends very much on the way in which it is prepared and served.

Stanley was intensely interested in everything he saw and heard. The fine chestnut mare in the stable, the vermin pole, the hedgehog taken from the trap of the keeper, the guinea fowls and their unmusical note, the pheasants in the aviary, and the collection of eggs got together by the keeper's boys. Here were two boys who have to walk four miles out to school and four miles home —eight miles a day—and yet they have secured certificates covering a period of several years for 'Never absent, never late!' No matter what the weather be like, hail, rain, or snow, scorching heat, or piercing cold, off to school trudge the hale and hearty little fellows, day after day, month after month, year after year! These boys know every bird's nest almost for miles around, and will willingly conduct you to where their treasures are, such as screaming thrushes, bottle tits, jenny wrens, nettle creepers, charbobs, green linnets; these are a few of the old-fashioned names by which these boys call their pet wild birds.

Walking to the station towards the gloaming

hour, the blackcaps and nightingales singing most beautiful music as we passed through the fast-greening woodland, we chanced to cross the Bridge-water Canal. A barge was in the lock, and Stanley was much interested in watching the canal men as they emptied the lock of water to enable the craft to proceed on its way. The barge-woman's little child sat high on the craft whilst the lock was emptying. The barge bumped against the brick-work of the lock and shook the poor little mite, but he (for it was a boy) cared nought for such trifles, and shook his hand to Stanley in a most business-like way. The boy's mother was on land, helping to empty the lock, and just as the gates opened she swung herself on to the barge, fondled her child, caught hold of the rudder, and steered away towards London.

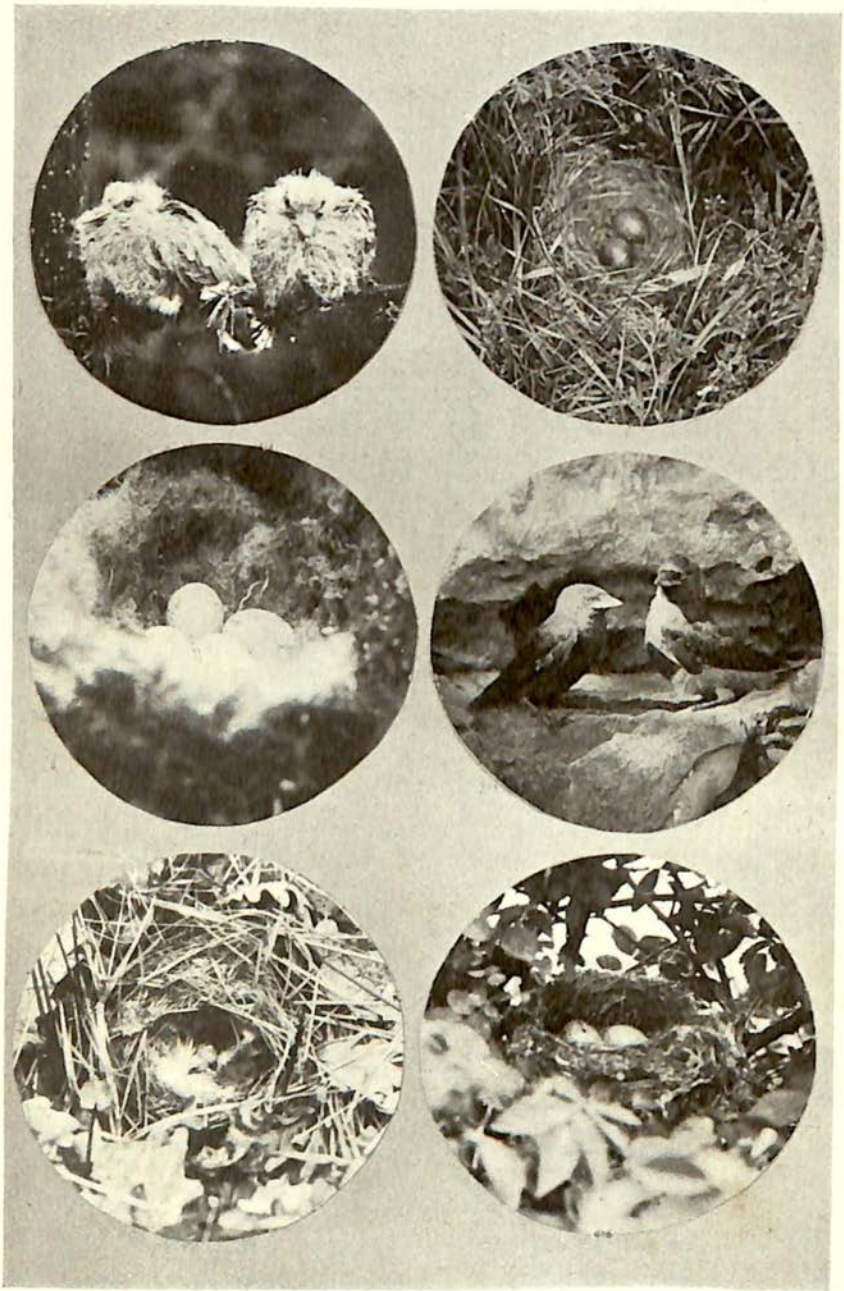


FIG. 44.—YOUNG RING DOVES. FIG. 45.—NEST AND EGGS OF SKYLARK.
FIG. 46.—NEST AND EGGS OF MARSH TIT.
FIG. 47.—YOUNG CARRION CROWS.
FIG. 48.—NEST AND EGGS OF WILLOW WARBLER.
FIG. 49.—NEST OF CHAFFINCH.

XXI

MAY—THIRD WEEK

The Long-rooted Cat's-Ear—The Smooth Crepis—The Mountain Geranium—The Meadow-Sweet—The Chiff-Chaff—The Turtle-Dove

'TO-DAY, Stanley, we should find quite a large number of wild flowers in bloom which we have not previously recorded in our note-books, and if the weather had been warm this spring, the floral wealth of the country-side would be even much greater than now. Notice that the dandelions have mostly gone to seed, but in the same field occupied by them two new species of plants have come into blossom—the long-rooted cat's-ear and the smooth crepis. Both have a yellow disc like the dandelion, and are near relatives of the latter plant.

'You will observe that whereas the cat's-ear bears one inflorescence at the end of a very long stalk, the crepis has several of them on one upright stalk, producing a cluster of bright yellow flowers, which look very beautiful when full out.

'It is most interesting to notice this particular field—crowded in the early spring with dandelions, now tenanted by cat's-ear and crepis—before the sun is high in the heavens, then again towards noon, and lastly in the afternoon. In the early morning the field hardly presents any yellow colour, but when the sun has played upon the closed eyelids of the flowers they open their eyes to the full light of day, and the whole field throws off a brilliant expanse of flaring yellow.

'"Bundles of energy," I once heard a noted naturalist call the sunbeams, and the remark is a very true one. We all love the sunshine, and feel better and brighter when it sheds its bright, warm rays upon the earth; and the plants and trees, birds and insects, love the sunshine too. Walk through that same field after two o'clock in the afternoon, and you will notice that the mass of yellow, to be observed two or three hours previously, has disappeared—a wonderful transformation scene in the plant world. Flowers require rest, like you and I. Plants work very hard; the roots, the stem, the leaves, the flowers, the fruit, all have an important work to do, and require rest to ensure their being in a fit condition to work again on the morrow.

'Here is a really beautiful wild plant garnishing this dust-laden hedgerow. The purple flowers lend quite a striking colour to the dusty roadside,

FIG. 50.—LAMBS BY THE WAYSIDE.

and stand out boldly against the white of the hedge parsley, the garlic mustard, and the greater stitchwort. This purple flower is a wild geranium, known as the mountain geranium. There are several species of wild geraniums hereabouts, such as the dove's-foot crane's-bill, the beautiful herb-robert, and other near relatives which are hardly so common. The cold north and north-east winds have considerably set back the hands of Nature's clock; but, in spite of this, here is an ox-eye daisy in flower; there is a bramble showing its blossoms; here, by this little silver streamlet, is the delicious blue of the brooklime. Notice how the rushes and water-grasses are springing up along this watery stretch of field. Observe these attractive leaves here. What do you think this plant is?'

'Please tell me, Uncle.'

'This, then, is the meadow-sweet, which will not yet open its sweet-scented blossoms. It smells most sweetly, perfuming the whole air, and has been aptly termed the queen of the meadows. There, did you see that small bird come out from that tuft of herbage? Let us make a search, in the hope of finding its nest.'

Down on his knees went my nephew, searching with quick and eager eyes for the hidden treasure. At last we espied the homestead, an oval nest, lined profusely with feathers, containing six small white eggs, spotted with light red.

Stanley was all excitement, and no sooner was the nest discovered than he wanted to know the name of the owner of this snug dwelling-place.

'Well, Stanley, it would be unfair for me to ask you to guess the name of the little bird we flushed, so I will tell you its name. The nest is that of the chiff-chaff, that cheery little herald of the spring whose notes we listened to for the first time last March. You will have noticed that the bird resorts to the topmost branches of the tallest trees of the woodland through which we wander, but, strange to relate, it builds its domed nest upon the ground. See how snugly it is hidden, and what an ideal bird-nursery this is. What excellent sense the bird has displayed in placing its nest on this side of the bank, so as to protect from the cold winds the young, when hatched; and how artfully it is concealed. Had we not flushed the bird, the chances are that we should never have discovered the nest.

'What a happy hunting-ground this field is! Wild flowers in great profusion all around; birds —nightingales, blackcaps, willow-wrens, whitethroats, and others—singing in a grand chorus; skylarks ascending up towards the blue clouds above us; swallows skimming across the field in unerring flight, now rising, now falling; starlings chattering in an unknown language from the tree yonder; song-thrushes uttering sweet music,

THE GREATER WHITETHROAT.

varied, loud, and clear, sounding very pleasant to the ear, and helping to soften and refine the mellow vespers of the sooty blackbirds.

'From that belt of woodland comes the soft, agreeable cooing of the turtle-dove. Notice that the notes are softer than the loud notes of the ring-dove, and take the form of a "Croo" rather than a "Coo." Here in this tiny little field, a mere speck upon this beautiful earth, we are surrounded by sights and sounds such as should please the most indifferent observer; the songs of birds, the monotone of the bees and other winged creatures; the wild flowers in their many varied forms of colour, size, and shape; the delicious greens and yellows of the trees; the pure country air. Far away from city, town, or village we seem; in a virgin fastness, far from the madding crowd, and yet within a few miles of London, the greatest city in the world.'

XXII

MAY—FOURTH WEEK

The Upright Meadow Crowfoot—The Orange-tip Butterfly—The Tortoiseshell Butterfly—The Garden White Butterfly—The Ash

'THE merrie month of May, Stanley, is speeding away all too quickly for us, and it hardly seems possible that we shall take our last May ramble to-day. Five months have passed since we had our first ramble together; and it will not be long before we pass the halfway milestone. The cold and cheerless spring has hardly prepared us for the hot, summer-like weather we are now enjoying. It is so hot, and walking becomes such a burden, that I propose that we should sit down quietly in this beautiful meadow, and look and listen for what we can see and hear.

'Notice the great mass of yellow all over the field, a scene of floral splendour. This wealth of colour is produced chiefly by the flaring yellow of the upright meadow crowfoot. Let me pluck a flower and explain it to you. We will start at the

FIG. 51.—BEES ON THISTLE.

FIG. 52 —COMMON CURRANT MOTH.

flower-stalk and work upwards. We first reach a whorl of green leaves, but which in the crowfoot are often more yellowish than greenish in colour. In this particular instance, however, the leaves are distinctly green. This whorl of leaves, then, is called the calyx, and the calyx is made up of separate leaves called sepals. See, here, I will pull off the sepals one by one. There, the flower is now without a calyx.'

'What is the use of the calyx, Uncle?'

'To protect the flower when it is in bud. Moreover, it has recently been shown that sometimes the sepals curl back towards the flower-stalk, and thus prevent insects, which are of no assistance to the flower in the way of fertilization, from crawling into the corolla, and robbing the plant of its honey. Sometimes the calyx remains after the fruit has ripened. The next time you eat a strawberry you will be able to see for yourself an excellent example of this, for the calyx of the luscious strawberry is still upon the plant when the fruit is ripe.

'Passing inwards, we reach another whorl of coloured leaves, called petals, the whole of the petals being called the corolla.'

'What do the petals do, Uncle?'

'Partly protect the essential parts of the flower, and partly, by their usually brilliant colours, provide attraction for insect visitors.

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Other forms of attraction for insects are provided in the honey-glands secreted in the flower, which justly compensate the insect visitor for his visit. Insects are also attracted to flowers by their sweet scent.

'Now we reach another whorl of organs. These are called stamens, which are borne on a slender stem or stalk, called a filament. At the end you will notice a rounded body. This is called the anther, which contains a yellow dust called pollen. In some plants—the primrose, for example—there is no filament or stalk to the anther, these being situated upon the corolla-tube, and at other times—in different plants—the anthers are seated directly upon the part of the flower from which they grow.

'Now, exactly in the centre of the flower you will observe another little cluster of organs. These are called pistils. The pistil generally consists of stigma, style, and ovary.'

'Oh, Uncle! there is such a lovely butterfly settled on that cuckoo-flower. It is whitish in colour, with orange at the tips of its wings. Whatever is the name of it?'

'It is the male orange-tip butterfly, one of the sweetest little butterflies which wing their merry flight across the meadows during the summer. The female orange-tip does not possess the beautiful orange tips to the wings, having black instead of orange. There, on that piece of red clover, you

may see another beautiful British butterfly, a large tortoiseshell. Does he not look a picture? See how gracefully he opens and closes his wings, and how difficult it is to see the insect when the wings are closed.

'This glorious May-day the butterflies are out in large numbers. Many have come from their hiding-places to enjoy a few more days in the bright sunshine before they die. A great number have only just been hatched out from the pupa or chrysalis state, and are flying slowly over the meadows before trusting themselves to any lengthened flight. Notice how some of the large and small garden-whites fly, hesitatingly and awkwardly. They do not yet possess complete control over their wings, and are almost carried along by the faint breeze, and eventually fall in the grass from sheer exhaustion.

'See how the ox-eye daisies are coming into flower, and observe how the hedgerows are garlanded with the white flowers of the hedge-parsley. It is so hot and sultry that now, towards mid-day, the birds have almost ceased singing. The skylark, however, is not affected by the heat. There he is up aloft, towering towards the blue sky above us, singing sweet music as he goes.

'One more item of interest I must point out to you to-day, and that is, the late leafing of the ash tree. Do you see those trees at the far end of

the field only just showing a faint tinge of green, whilst the oaks hard by are almost fully leafed? It is many years since the ash was so late in putting on its summer dress, and if country people are right, it means that we are to experience a very dry summer.'

FIG. 53.—NEST AND EGGS OF MOORHEN.

FIG. 54.—MOUNTAIN ASH IN FLOWER.

FIG. 55.—OXEYE DAISIES.

XXIII

JUNE—FIRST WEEK

Oak-Apples—The Gall-Fly—The Beech—The Spotted Flycatcher—The Chaffinch—The Yellow Bunting—The Greater Whitethroat

'WE have now entered upon our sixth month, Stanley, beautiful leafy June, the month of roses. We may well sing with Cornelius Webbe—

'"Welcome, bright June, and all its smiling hours,
With song of birds, and stir of leaves and wings,
And run of rills, and bubble of cool springs,
And hourly bursts of pretty buds to flowers,
And buzz of happy bees in violet bowers;
And gushing lay of the loud lark, who sings
High in the silent sky, and sleeks his wings
In frequent sheddings of soft falling showers;
With plunge of struggling sheep in plashy floods,
And timed bleat of shorn and shivering lamb,
Answered in fondest yearnings by its dam;
And cuckoo's call from solitary woods,
And hum of many sounds making one voice,
That fills the summer air with most melodious noise."

'Notice the large number of oak-apples to be seen now; and this reminds me that three days ago, May 29, was oak-apple day.'

'I think I remember seeing a lot of people wearing oak-apples, Uncle. Why do they wear oak-apples on May 29 every year?'

'They do it to commemorate King Charles II.'s escape by hiding in an oak tree. Just at this season these oak-apples are quite soft, but later in the year they become very hard; they are then known as bullet-galls. Now, these peculiar oak-apples are not, of course, the fruit of the tree, as so many people suppose. The acorns which you gather in the autumn are the fruit. These oak-apples, or galls, are caused by an insect known as the gall-fly. The female gall-fly possesses a sharp ovi-depositor, by the aid of which she pierces the young twigs of the oak and deposits her eggs. When the eggs have been laid in the young twigs, the sap gathers round the bark where it has been pierced, and the oak-apples are gradually formed. Inside the "apple" is the egg of the gall-fly. This egg hatches in due time, and the caterpillar, or larva, feeds for a time upon the soft, spongy interior.

'After a while the grub or caterpillar has had sufficient imprisonment in the oak-apple, and wishes to change into a chrysalis. When this stage in its existence is about to be reached, the grub drills a small hole through the wooden-like case of the oak-gall, and so makes good its escape. That is what you have noticed by those small holes

in the oak-apples in the autumn. You may observe, too, small, red, cherry-like galls upon the oak leaves. These are produced in a similar way to the larger oak-apples, but by another species of gall-fly.

'Let us ramble in this lovely beech wood this morning. Notice how clear of herbage the ground is, covered for more than a foot deep with the leaves of former years. Particularly observe how little undergrowth there is in this beech wood. The beeches themselves are tall, stately, and heavily foliaged. They run up to a great height, you will see, before the branches commence. Many visitors, it is evident, have been here before us; the clear, smooth bark of the spacious boles enables persons to carve their names upon it. Here is a tree covered with human autographs. "W. Warren, 1875," runs one. That was carved thirty-two years ago, a very long time to you, and we are still able to decipher the letters and figures without difficulty.

'Just watch that bird on one of the lowest branches of that smaller tree. Watch him as now he flies from the branch, snatches an insect from the air, poises for a moment, and then proceeds back to his watch-tower. This is the spotted flycatcher, which I told you we should be sure to see on our walks and talks. It is a most useful bird, and rarely, if ever, does any harm. It visits

gardens and orchards, and is, as a consequence, thought to be a lover of fruit. This, however, is, I think, incorrect, for my experience teaches me that the flycatcher is, as its name implies, a flycatcher, or an insectivorous bird entirely.

'Look through the trees to the valley beyond. There is a pretty sight for you! Does not the river—its waters shining in the sunshine—look a picture of pure silver as seen against the dark green of the beeches? The river is famous for its trout, and a walk by the sparkling stream would enable us to observe a good many speckled fish rising for the insect life, which is now so abundant.

'Here in this bush by the side of the wood is the nest of the chaffinch. Isn't its mossy homestead a model of neatness? Small, compact, and beautifully moulded. There on that hawthorn sprig sits the male bird, singing a pretty song to his sitting mate. We will not disturb her from the nest. Here, close by, is another nest, a larger structure than that of the chaffinch, composed of coarse grass and lined with horsehair. The owner is not at home, so we will peep inside. There are three eggs! Let me show you one. Notice the peculiar markings upon the egg; they are very much like a child's scribble. It is the egg of the yellow bunting, that beautiful bird we have so often seen on our rambles, and to whose simple song, "A little bit of bread and no cheese," we have

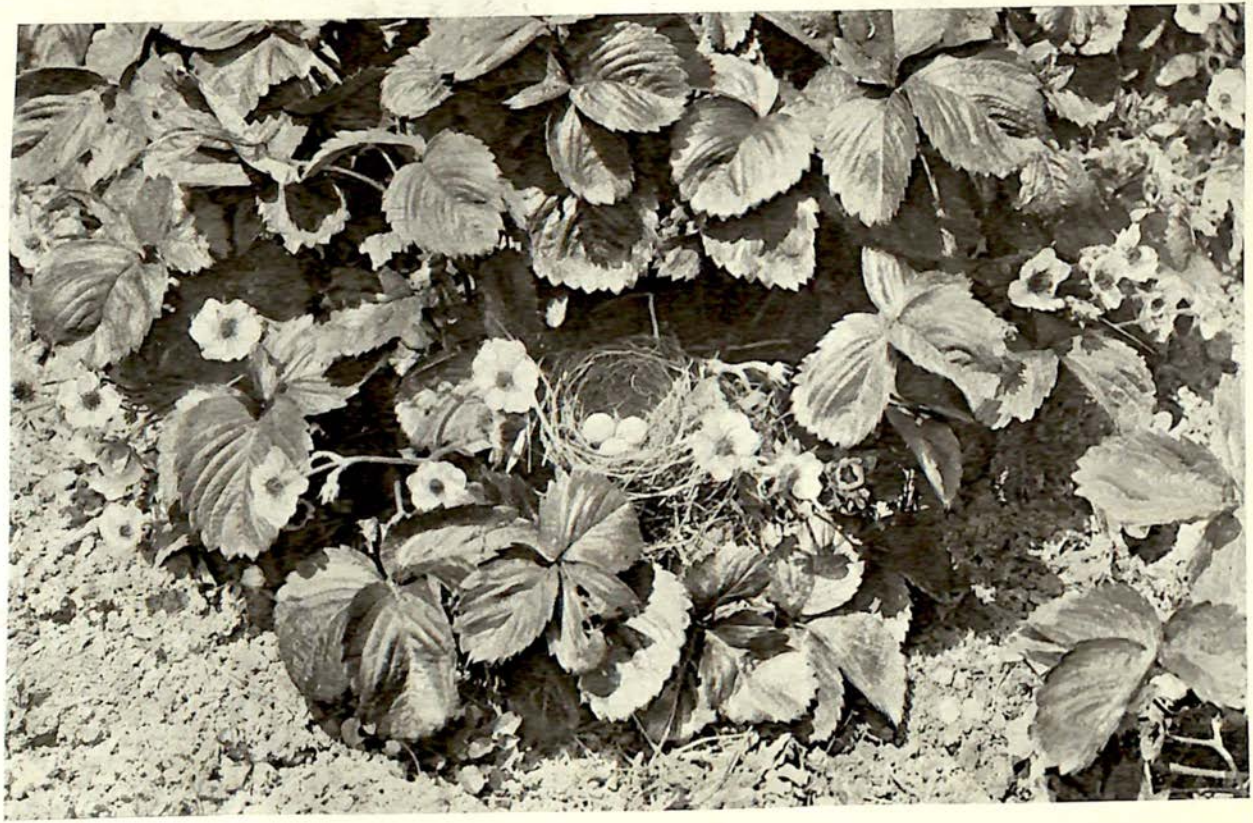


FIG. 56.—NEST AND EGGS OF BLACKCAP.

listened so many times. Owing to these peculiar markings on the egg this bird is also called the scribbling lark; it is also known as the yellow hammer, and by many other curious names.

'Further along the hedgerow, in this clump of stinging nettles, I have found the frail nest of the greater whitethroat. Come and see how cleverly the small, neat nest is attached to the stems of the nettles. Placing its nest in nettles has resulted in this bird being called the nettle-creeper. Peep over the herbage into the interior of the nest and see how snugly the five eggs lie in the nest. They are spotted and blotched at the larger end for the most part, and do not vary—either in size or colour—nearly so much as the eggs of many other British birds.'

XXIV

JUNE—SECOND WEEK

Scarlet Poppies—Field Scabious—The Woodland's Greening—Nature's Regular Progress—Her Author

'YOU will never see the countryside looking nicer, Stanley, than it does on this beautiful June day. Even the ash tree is fully leafed now; it is the last to reach home in the race of the trees; and the foliage of trees and hedgerows is deliciously green after the welcome rains. Shakespeare has written that—

'"Summer's lease hath all too short a date."

And so say all of us!

'The nightingale is rapidly going off song, and the great chorus of the birds is ceasing; but the blackcap is singing to greater perfection now than ever he did—a curious contrast in bird song. The cuckoo, too, still calls loudly. Make the most of his plaintive notes, however, for it will not be long before the well-known call will cease until the advent of another springtime. Country people have a saying that when the barley is in the ear

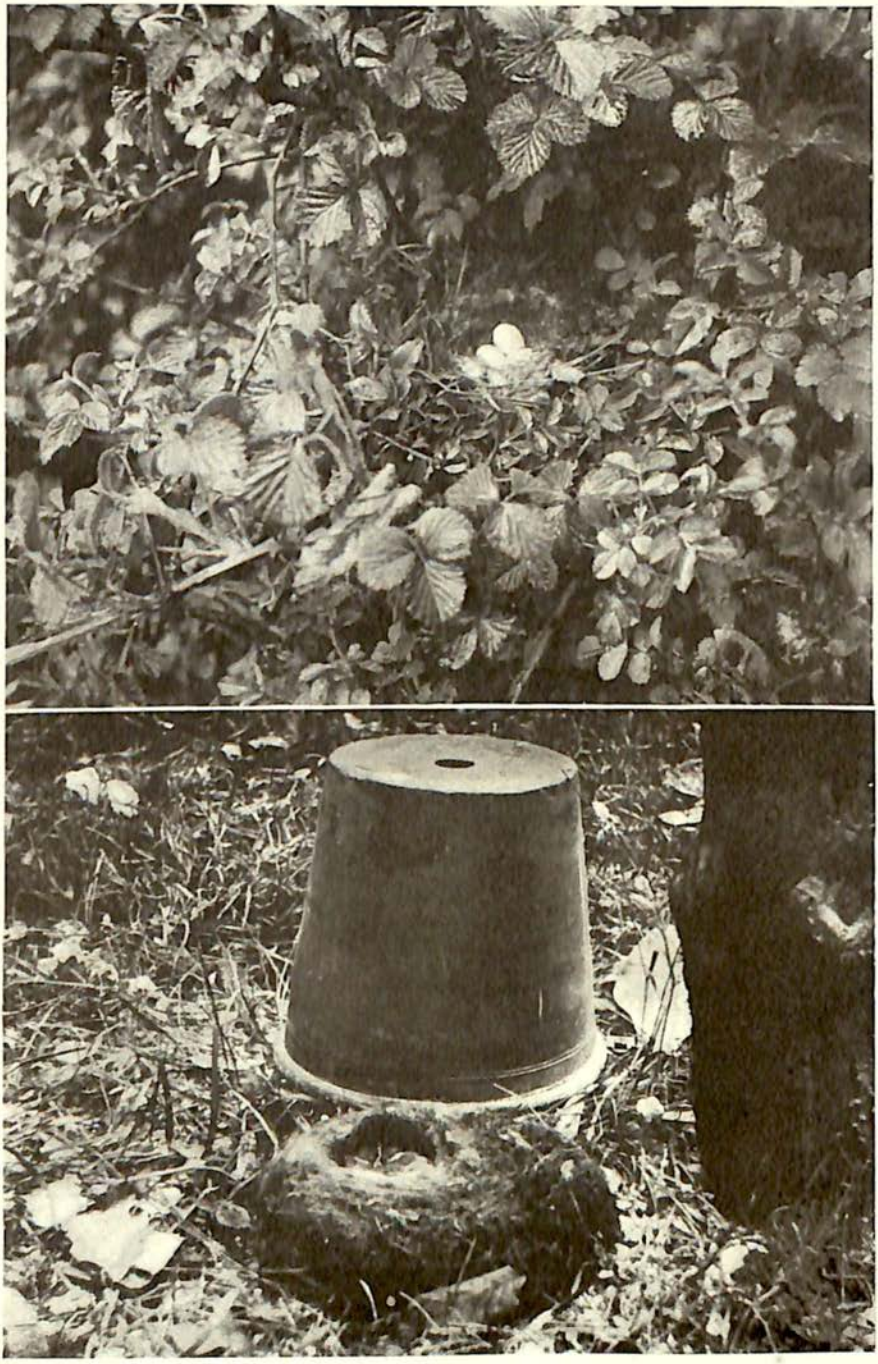


FIG. 57.—NEST AND EGGS OF GREENFINCH.

FIG. 58.—NEST AND YOUNG OF GREAT TIT UNDERNEATH FLOWERPOT.

the cuckoo's departure from amongst us will not be much longer delayed.

'Notice along the hedgerows how the garlic mustard has gone off flower, and that the wild hyacinths are past blossoming, and have become seeded. Later on, when the seed-vessels have become hardened and browned by the sun, the black seeds inside will rattle loud as we brush past them. There are many other species of plants coming into blossom and rapidly taking the place of those that have pleased us during the spring and early summer.

'See here, in this oat-field, there are several scarlet poppies already in bloom. In a few weeks' time you will be able to feast your eyes upon as fair a floral sight as any one could wish to see. I know of no lovelier sight in the whole realm of Nature than a mass of scarlet poppies among oats or corn. No garden flowers planted by man produce such a pleasing effect, and when the field scabious bursts into flower, the mauve colour of the latter's blossoms adds still further to the wealth and contrast of colour. You will see all this in due time. Let us wait and watch. Perhaps at no other time of year are the young leaves of the oak and maple seen to such perfection as now. The colours—red, purple, and pink—are exquisite, and when seen towards evening, just before the sun sets, the effect is very beautiful.

'The woodland makes a lovely picture now. Let us wander to that favourite wood of ours and observe the transformation scene. How well everything in the world of Nature has been arranged! No bustle, no hurry, no excitement. Man has played the unimportant part of the looker-on. You remember how bare and dismal-looking this wood was when we started our first walk and talk. Feast your eyes upon it now. The boughs are laden with leaves. Many trees bear such a quantity of leaves, flowers, and fruit (for the beech tree is now showing its fruit, as well as the maple and other trees) that they seem as if they must surely snap off because of the weight they carry.

'How silently Nature has worked from the first green flush of spring up to the great gallery of summer! No fanfare of trumpets heralded Nature's full approach, if we except her own cheery little trumpeters, the birds. Everything has been working steadfastly, in proper turn, and well. The frost, the rain, the wind, the sunshine, the storm and tempest, heat and cold, and the balmy spring, have all played their parts, and played them wondrously well. What interesting and lovely developments we have been permitted to watch! How glorious the scene, and what a number of tenants have filled it and delighted us! We have looked upon, carefully examined, and gathered, I trust, much information about many birds,

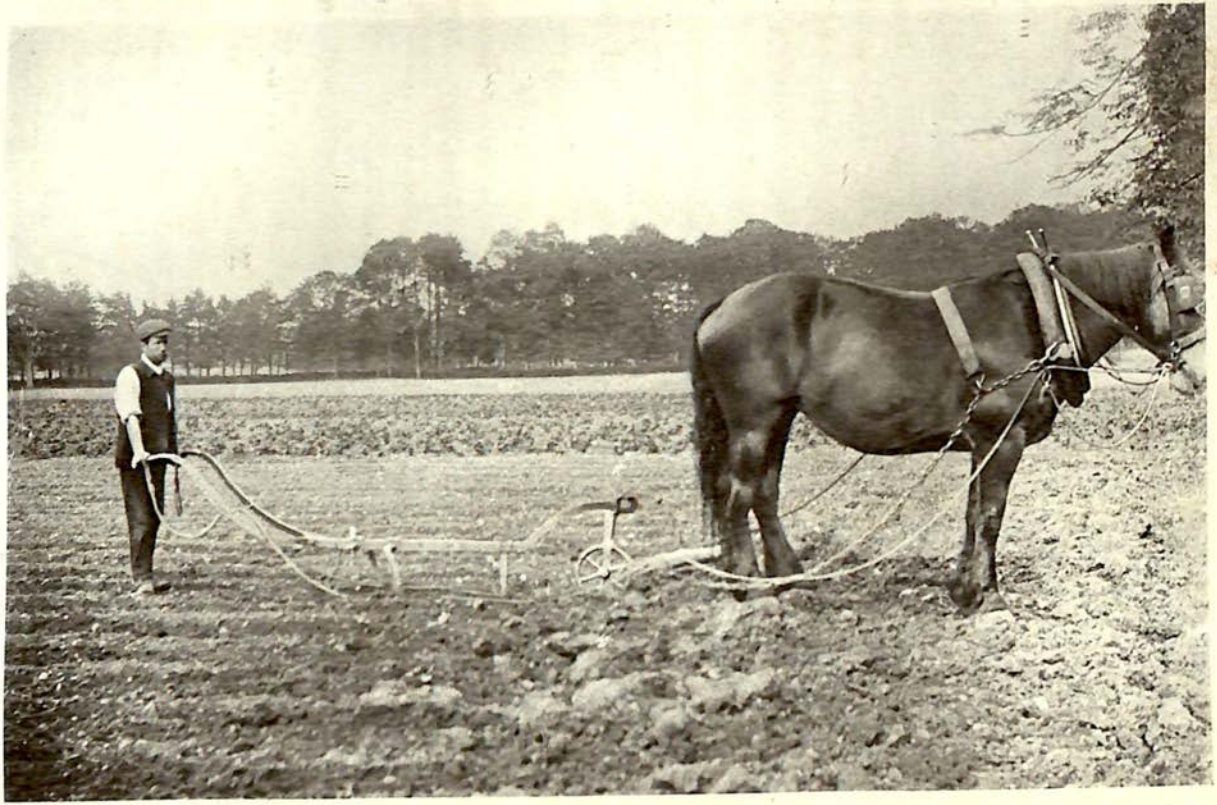


FIG. 59.—PLOUGHING.

trees, flowers, insects, and mammals. You have seen some of Nature's marvels from their very beginnings. You saw the curtain rise in the first week of January, and you will, if all goes well, see it fall in December.

'Nature herself, and all her ways, are wonderful; but how rarely we stop to think about them in this age of hurry-scurry! We try to crowd into our lives within a week what our grandfathers and grandmothers did in a lifetime. All the more need for us then to get into the country, and take the part of students of Nature's treasures. You have seen and heard some of these. You have lovingly gazed upon the pleasant scenes, and listened to the sweet music, but we still marvel how all these wonderful effects are produced. How is it that everything in Nature seems to work together, and in harmony? Who is the great Author, Controller, and Perfecter of all these things? Turn the matter over in your mind, my young friend, and I think you will answer, with me, that it must be none other than the great God Himself.'

XXV

JUNE—THIRD WEEK

The Month of Roses—Elderberries—The Red, White, and Pink Campions—Wild and Cultivated Strawberries—The Young Birds

'JUNE, the month of roses, Stanley, is proceeding apace. Make the most of this lovely season of the year ere it has passed away. See how beautiful the hedgerows are garlanded with gorgeous festoons of wild roses, pink and white. They are very delicate, however, and when plucked soon shatter.

'Notice, too, how heavily laden with blossom the elder is. It looks as if there will be a large crop of elderberries, so that those people who make elderberry wine will have a large crop to pick from. Another somewhat similar flower to the elder, but a great deal smaller, may now be seen, namely the dogwood. We noticed the beautiful purple colour of the stems back in the early spring; now we see this hedgerow-loving plant at the height of its beauty. The corn is in the ear, and hay-making

FIG. 60.—NEST AND EGGS OF PHEASANT.

has already commenced. The scarlet poppies are daily becoming more conspicuous, the scabious and knapweed, thistles, and cow-parsnip are all rapidly coming into blossom.

'You will have noticed, however, that the great chorus of the birds is ceasing. The song-thrush still treats us to sweet music, as does his near relative the blackbird. The skylark is singing most deliciously, and the greater whitethroat and black-cap still utter their pleasing contributions to Nature's orchestra. But we have passed the time of the great outburst of song, and shall not again be listeners to such bird music until the advent of another springtime.'

'Uncle, here is a beautiful, pure white flower which I don't think you have told me the name of. What is it?'

'It is the white campion, and I will explain to you a most interesting point in connection with this plant. The pistils and stamens are borne on different plants; there are what are known as pistillate and staminate flowers. I will pluck one of the flower-heads growing in this clump here. There! Do you see that, at the end of the corolla-tube, right at the top, there are four pistils sticking out? Now, I want you to go and pluck me one of those flowers from the clump of campion farther down the hedgerow. Good fortune is on our side, for this flower is a staminate plant. See,

just below the top of the corolla-tube are several stamens. No doubt insects play a great part in the fertilization of this flower—indeed, even on these particular flower-heads a large number of insects may be seen.

'There are three species of campions found in our neighbourhood; the white, which we have just examined, the pink or red, and the bladder campion. The latter is the least attractive of the three, the pink perhaps the most.

'I see the wild strawberries are ripening under the June sunshine. Two things I have noticed in my garden which agree with those along the countryside. The strawberries in my garden ripened at the same time as the wild strawberries on this bank, and the spotted orchis in my garden came into flower at the same time as those in our favourite woodland glen.

'Look at this field of beautiful grasses; how ripe the grasses are, giving off an abundance of pollen whenever the wind blows or as we brush past them. It seems almost a pity that these lovely grasses will soon be laid low by the cutting-machine; but the farmer has his living to get, and must make hay while the sun shines.

'What a quantity of young birds are to be seen along the lanes now, and how busy the parents are obtaining food for their hungry children! Young birds have large appetites, and almost the very

first thing which a young bird does when it breaks from its shell-house is to open its mouth wide—for food. I have been noticing some robins feeding their spotted chicks recently, and the enormous number of caterpillars, worms, and insects which they have brought to the nest has surprised me. And what pleased me, too, was the way in which cock robin looked after his mate when she—brave little bird—was sitting upon the young, before it was safe to leave them.

'I have observed the cock bird feeding the female many times; and I have also noticed that although cock robin had a large caterpillar or worm in his beak, it did not prevent him from singing to his mate, doubtless to let her know that he was coming to her with another fine fat grub. So tame has this cock robin become, that a few days ago he actually allowed me to approach close enough to him to stroke his head, an instance of how tame wild-birds will become if afforded protection.'

XXVI

JUNE—FOURTH WEEK

Foxgloves—The Burdock—Pheasants; how reared; their foster-mothers; their enemies

'HOW time flies, Stanley! We have passed Midsummer Day, June 24, and also what the calendar tells us is the longest day of the year, June 21. This morning we will pay a visit to the gamekeeper, and if we have good fortune he will probably permit us to go round with him whilst he feeds the young pheasants.'

My companion trudged merrily along the dusty high road, although the scorching summer sun was high in the heavens, and this made walking quite a burden. At last we arrived in the cool shade of the woodland, and, peeping over the hedgerow, saw as fine a show of foxgloves as mortal eye could wish to behold.

'Oh, what lovely flowers, Uncle!' said my nephew; 'but I notice, Uncle, that all the foxglove plants are in flower at the bottom of the plant, and the upper flowers are in bud.'

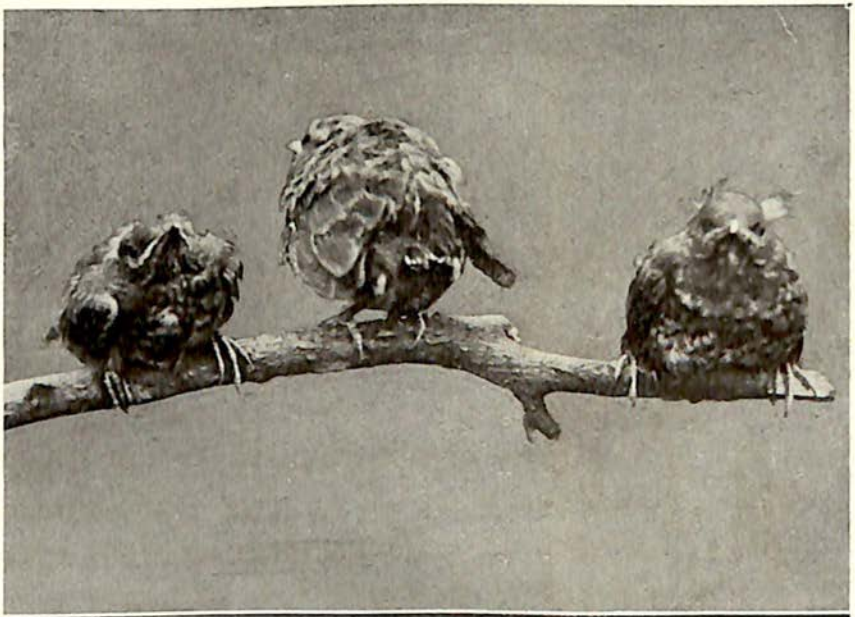


FIG. 61.—YOUNG BLACKBIRDS OUT OF NEST.

FIG. 62.—YOUNG WILD DUCK.

'You are becoming quite a clever observer, my boy, if not a botanist, and I am pleased to notice that you are using your eyes more than when—in bleak January—we started on our first Nature ramble. Your remarks about the foxglove are quite correct. This really beautiful wild flower generally opens its blossoms at the base of the flower-stalk first, in the same way as the beautiful white, blue, red, and purple lupins in our garden at home.

'Here we have the burdock just coming into blossom. Notice how very like the leaves of this burdock plant are to those of the foxglove. People often root up plants in the early spring which they think are foxgloves, but these, when they afterwards come into blossom, turn out to be the burdock. This latter, as you can already see, cannot vie, in the luxury of its floral dress, with the exquisite beauty of the far-famed and stately foxglove.'

A hundred yards or so brought us right up to the keeper's cottage.

'Good morning, keeper.'

'Good morning to you, sir, and you, my little fellow. Pleased to see you this morning; but I am very busy, as I am just going to feed the young pheasants in the park. If you care to come with me you are very welcome. You are coming? Very well, then, follow me.'

Away we went—my little companion and I—following hard upon the heels of the bronze-faced gamekeeper. Stanley was greatly excited at the prospect of seeing the young game-birds, and was most interested in what he saw.

Here in the parkland were a great many coops, each containing about a dozen young pheasants, pretty and attractive little creatures, which were being reared only to be shot down in the autumn and winter months. The keeper went about his work in a very businesslike manner, throwing down two or three handfuls of specially prepared food at each coop. A horde of sparrows thought the feeding of the game-birds fine fun, and gobbled up a lot of the tasty food as if they had as much right to it as the pheasants. Starlings and turtle-doves also visited the coops and had a rare feast.

'Have you had good success with your birds, keeper?'

'Very fair, sir. Nothing to grumble about. Cramp has been my only enemy. On one feed I picked up over fifty dead pheasants, and the strange thing is that this trouble was restricted to a few coops at the far end of the park. It seemed to sweep across just one portion like a plague, and killed the youngsters with hardly any warning.'

Stanley could not understand why it was that

FIG. 63.—FULL BLOWN ROSES.

fowls acted as foster-mothers to young pheasants, and he would not be content until the keeper had explained to him that if left to run wild they do not flourish, but soon die out. Those who delight in shooting down this very handsome game-bird, therefore, must of necessity rear a large number themselves, by placing the eggs under fowls or hatching them off in an incubator.

When the young pheasants are old enough to leave their foster-mother, they are taken to a selected wood and let loose there. The keeper still goes his rounds and feeds them, and often sleeps in the wood for some weeks, to warn off the preying foxes, who are to be feared most during the night. I said he sleeps, but if he is a vigilant keeper, precious little sleep comes his way, and he more often smokes his pipe the whole night through until the dawning of the morning.

Foxes commit sad havoc amongst the pheasants just as they are growing into nice big birds; and I knew of an instance in which over thirty were killed in a quarter of an hour! Where it is a hunting and a game-preserving country, however, the keeper has to keep both foxes and pheasants; but he must see to it that they are kept out of each other's way. It is regarded as almost a sacred duty to preserve foxes for people who take pleasure in hunting one of our largest and most beautiful of British mammals, in spite of the great amount of

mischief which the crafty and sagacious animals are capable of doing if they are allowed to get amongst the pheasants.

'Stanley, we must specially note upon this ramble the real beauty of the countryside. The air is perfumed—even to excess—by the flower of the elder, which now bears huge clusters of blossoms. Note, too, that the dogwood is now at its flowering height, that the scarlet poppies are brightening the cornfields with their flaring blossoms, and that the mauve scabious is almost daily becoming more prominent. We have reached the great gallery of summer. Soon—too soon—we shall have to record that summer's lease has expired, and that autumn—the incoming tenant—has arrived.

'But we must live in Nature's present, with all she has to interest us, and must not, in this connection, anticipate the future.'

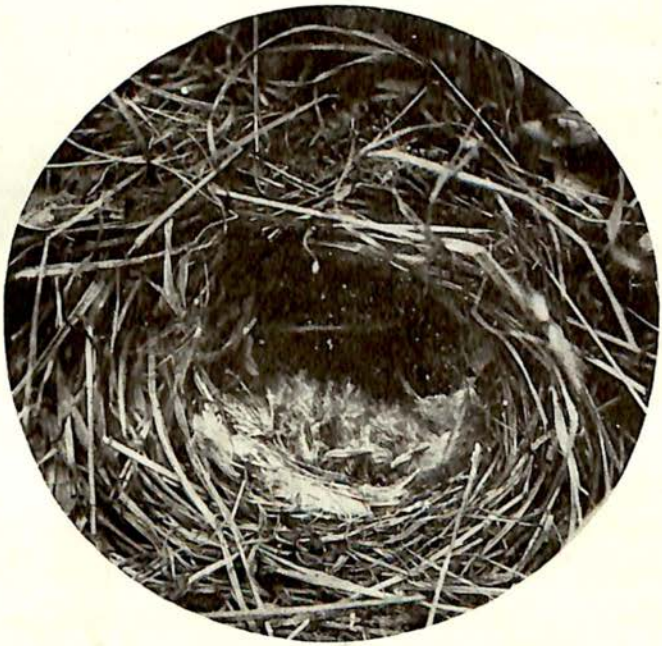


FIG. 64.—YOUNG FEMALE CHAFFINCH.
FIG. 65.—YOUNG CHIFF CHAFFS IN NEST.

XXVII

JULY—FIRST WEEK

How to follow Nature's Year—Hints to a Beginner—Meadow Sweet

WE have passed the halfway milestone of the year, Stanley, and every ramble and every chat will find us nearing the end of our twelve months' journeying. We will ramble by the river this morning, for I want to point out to you the meadow sweet, which is now due to come into flower.

'However do you know, Uncle, when all these beautiful wild plants are due to flower, when all these different birds are coming amongst us, when the butterflies should appear, and when we may expect the trees to leaf? I cannot understand it all, it seems so wonderful to me; and I have learned so much since you first took me for this series of walks and talks.'

'Well, you see, my young nephew, it is this way. To become a field naturalist you must use your eyes and your ears. You have already learned that much for yourself, and very good progress you

have made. As you pursue your field studies year by year, you, too, will be able to tell the time by Nature's clock. You will know exactly when to expect the first of the summer birds, and the date for the departure of the winter visitors. You will learn when to look for the first nest in the early spring, for the first wild flowers and butterflies, and many other interesting events in Nature's wonderful calendar. We get to know these things by experience. To succeed as a field naturalist, you must be enthusiastic, and pursue your studies regularly, year in and year out.

'You must go in for the study heart and soul, as it were, and if you do you will be surprised how easily the dates for various plants to flower, birds to build and sing, butterflies to appear, trees to leaf, and many other items in Nature's year will come back to you year by year. Each year you will—if you follow my advice—keep a Nature note-book, in which you will enter notes, as you have seen me do this year. Then the succeeding year you will turn up your entry of the year before, and note the forwardness or the backwardness of the season. Note how the dates compare, and the following year you will take the two previous years, until eventually, after keeping a note-book for a number of years, you will be able to strike average dates for the appearance of all these events in Nature's calendar.'

FIG. 66.—HEDGE PARSLEY.

FIG. 67.—WILD ROSES.

'Uncle, did you go for Nature walks in the country when you were a boy like me? And did you have an uncle who told you all about what you saw, just as you have been telling me?'

'Yes, Stanley, I was a little fellow of six years old when first I was introduced to Mother Nature, and my first acquaintance with her was of the pleasantest kind. I shall never forget my introduction, nor can I ever forget my tutor, and my guardian. I had not got a kind uncle—well, that is untrue, I had kind uncles, but they knew nothing about Nature. But I was a very fortunate boy, for I had a kind grandfather, and he acted towards me in the same way as I am doing to you.'

'And what do you remember first about Nature, Uncle?'

'My earliest recollection, my boy, is a hedge-sparrow's nest and eggs. I can see my grandfather lifting me up in his arms as if it happened ever such a short time ago; I can see that mossy homestead of the sparrow and its pale-blue eggs. Whenever I see a hedge-sparrow's nest now, I think of that first nest many years ago, and have loved the sparrow ever since.'

'And did you keep a Nature note-book, Uncle, when you were a little boy?'

'No, not exactly. But when I was fourteen years old I wrote my first article on birds for the local paper, and mighty proud I was when I saw

my name in print, I can assure you. Amongst the hundreds of articles I have written since then there is not one I cherish so much as that first effort of mine to write about the birds. I have a copy of the little essay in my press-cuttings book, and some time, when the long evenings come, I will read it to you.

'A year or two after I wrote that article, my first Nature note-book was started; but I was late in making a beginning. Nature study then was not so popular as it is now, and many children in the schools of to-day have shown me with pride their well and neatly kept little note-books. So that in a year or two I want you to make a start. You must not think that it is the rare things that are alone worth recording. The commonest events in Nature's year deserve a place in a note-book, and no record is too trifling.

'And now, after this little talk, we have reached the river.'

'Oh! I say, Uncle, something smells so beautiful. Whatever can it be?'

'I am glad you are not only using your eyes and ears to advantage when out-of-doors, but your sense of smell also. The delicious scent which you are now inhaling comes from the very flower which I wanted to show you, the meadow sweet, queen of the meadows. It loves moisture. Damp pastures are favourite haunts for it. Here

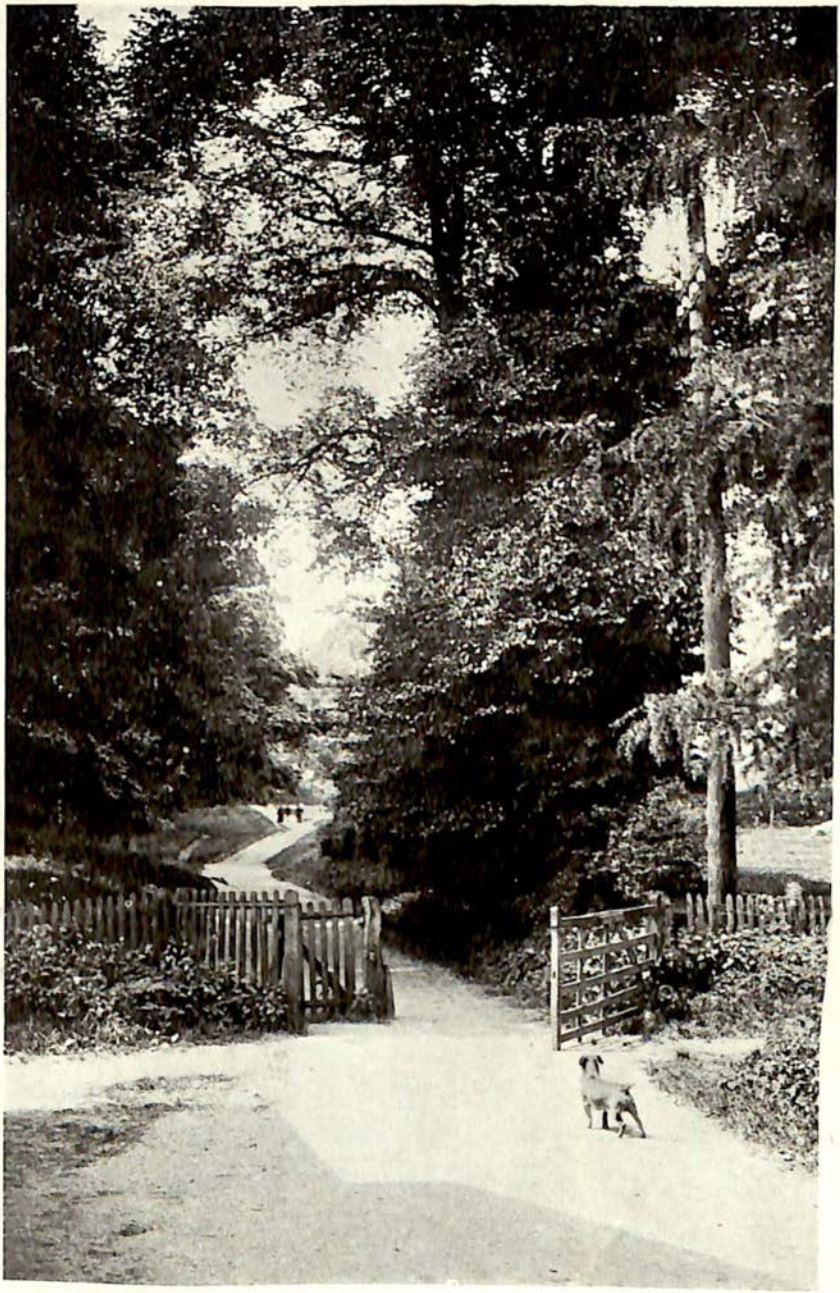


FIG. 68.—THE APPROACH TO THE WOODLAND.

is a piece just coming into bloom, and there is a piece in full blossom. Isn't it a delightful soft colour? yellowish-white is perhaps a good description. See how stately the plant grows, and how it towers its haughty head above these beautiful rushes. It has many companions of the field. Here are the golden heads of the water ragwort; there is the flaring red of the willow herb, here the soft yellow of the flag; and there again, in that little copse by the river, a sight as gorgeous as any one could wish to see.'

'How lovely, Uncle; what a pretty picture!'

'Yes, such a profusion of foxgloves I never remember seeing before. It is a splendid season for these stately flowers. There must be some thousands of plants here. Think how the little London children, who live in the slums and the back streets of the great city, and who rarely set eyes on Nature's nursery, would revel in looking at these floral treasures of the countryside. I can just imagine them being brought here and then gathering bunches of these lovely flowers. I often think of these poor little waifs of the London slums who so infrequently see the blue sky, who never hear the wild birds sing, nor see the lovely country which you and I enjoy.'

XXVIII

JULY—SECOND WEEK

Swallows and Martins—A Summer Storm—The Children's Daisy—A Pretty Rural Scene

'IT is very hot this morning, Stanley, and I think there must be a thunderstorm brewing. The air is peopled with small insects. See here the number which have settled upon us, and notice the swallows, swifts, and martins high up in the clouds having a right royal feast among the denizens of the air. Often when thunder is in the air a great number of insects appear. The birds seem to know this, and help to rid the land of many hurtful insect pests.

'I was noticing some swallows and martins yesterday during a severe thunderstorm. The rain came down in torrents, the thunder crashed like so many cannons being fired off one after another, the wind blew a regular hurricane, and the lightning flashed across the sky. Little cared those insect-loving birds, for there they were up aloft catching insects faster than either you or I could count.

And in the very teeth of the storm, when the storm-fiend seemed at his worst, there in the dark clouds soared a courageous skylark, singing sweet music, beautiful carols, which I at the time interpreted to mean that the storm was only temporary, that after a storm there is a calm, and that every cloud has a silver lining. It is a blessing that the farmers had got their hay carted and stacked before the storm came, but it is feared that the cereal crops—corn, barley, oats, rye and the like—will have suffered by being bashed down by the rain and wind.'

'Uncle, I don't like storms. Please do not tell me any more about them, and, if I may ask a favour of you—you told me to ask you questions—will you recite some more Nature poetry to me? It seems such a long while since we had any verses.'

'Very well, I will. What subject would you like?'

'Oh! something about flowers, Uncle, please.'

'Your request shall be attended to forthwith. Now let me think a moment. Here is a little daisy peering out into the wide world with its uplifted white and yellow face seeming to speak a message to us. Who would have thought that this tender little flower could have battled so bravely all through yesterday's storm? But you asked me not to speak about the storm again, so we will at once think of the daisy in all its innocence and

beauty. Some lines written by Chris Mackay, entitled, "If the daisy did not blow," give us some idea of the important place in the minds of children held by the daisy. Here they are—

'"They might not miss the daffodil,
In all her golden glow;
Nor yet, perchance, the hawthorn,
In robes of speckled snow;
They might forget the primrose,
And violet blooming low,
But the children would be weeping
If the daisy did not blow.

. .

They would sorely miss the bluebell,
Wind-tossed to and fro,
And from the emerald meadow,
The buttercups they know;
And yet they would forgive them,
If they forgot to grow,
But the children would be weeping
If the daisy did not blow."

'How do you like those lines, Stanley?'

'They are just lovely, Uncle, and I am sure they are quite true, for I think I should be miserable if there were no daisies, I love them so.'

'It is nice to hear you speak like that, my boy. It gladdens me to hear children say they love flowers, because I know if they love them they will prize them, and not wilfully pluck and destroy them. But I want you, as you grow older, to do something more than love flowers. I want you to study them and find out for yourself some of their

FIG. 69.—IRIS IN THE GARDEN.

wonderful secrets. In many a lowly plant—the daisy, if you like—there is hidden an important message to those who have the seeing eye and a contrite heart, a sense of the beautiful, the pure, the noble, and the good.

'I was quite struck when rambling a few days ago by the quiet loveliness of the countryside, the peacefulness of the wonderful scene before me as I sat in a hayfield upon a high hill. Below me was a charming valley; to the left a neat little village, with the church spire standing out, as they are wont to do, as a landmark for miles around. A fine stretch of woodland on the right, and in the extreme south a large sheet of water shining like burnished silver. If the task were not impossible, I would have counted the number of fields to be seen from where I was seated, and the number of hedgerows, and field-paths, and country lanes. It seemed strange to think that within barely twenty miles of where I was sitting lay the great City of London with its busy hum and turmoil.

'It was indeed a peaceful scene, save for the songs of a thrush and an ascending lark, and the sweet lullaby of busy bees. The joyful songs of the birds and the hum of insects added much to the charm of the pretty scene I have described to you. I seemed as if in a dream, for the air was full of the delicious scents of the meadow sweet, the elder, and new-mown hay. I feasted my eyes

upon the waving crops, the full-leafed trees, the butterflies, and the whole scene before me was indeed beautiful. Truly, I thought as I sat there, the poet who wrote the lines—

> '"From the soft vernal sky to the soft grassy ground,
> There was beauty above me, beneath and around,"

must have been looking upon a similar scene to that which I enjoyed.

'Are not those two beautiful lines, Stanley?'

'Yes, Uncle, they are just lovely.'

FIG. 70.—MUTE SWAN AND CYGNETS IN NEST.

XXIX

JULY—THIRD WEEK

The Mullein—The Agrimony—The Sweet-scented Limes—The Painted Lady Butterfly—Moths: Swallow-tail, Yellow Underwing, and Tiger

'THE cornfields tell us, Stanley, that we have had a great deal of sunshine, for see how the precious crops are browning. Where all was green a few weeks ago, now see the change! How silently the sun has done its work! but those "bundles of energy" have served the farmer well. Here is a lovely plant growing right on the edge of the field. What a wonder that such a flower has not attracted the eyes of the children passing by, and been plucked by them!'

'Oh, Uncle, what a splendid flower! I never remember seeing such a plant before. Why, it looks like a yellow foxglove!'

'The plant certainly has somewhat the same appearance as the foxglove we both know and love so well. It has the same stately habit, somewhat similar leaves, and a long spike of flowers, like the

plant of which you at once thought when you saw this one. However, it is not a yellow foxglove, as you will soon observe by a close examination of the flower, although it belongs to the same order. It is a mullein, and difficult to correctly name, because there are several mulleins, which are known as hybrids. It is not the black mullein, a much taller plant with very woolly leaves. Another species of mullein, known only by its Latin name, has a very woolly spike and leaves from whose wool lamp-wicks were made in bygone days.'

'Fancy lamp-wicks being made from plants, Uncle; how funny!'

'Yes, it does seem strange on learning this fact for the first time, but plants have been proved to be of immense service to human beings in many ways, and more especially because of the many excellent medicines which can be obtained from them. Our forefathers used these much more than we do at the present day, and you will remember when we had our dandelion talk in the early part of the year, I mentioned that many of the medicines obtainable from Nature's own storehouse are of far greater benefit than most of the quack medicines advertised and sold to-day.

'Here is another plant which, on first acquaintance, you might think to be a sort of dwarf mullein. It has yellow flowers, it is true, and is a very

FIG. 71.—A JULY SCENE.

upright plant, but you will notice the flowers are not in such dense clusters, and the leaves are quite different. It is the agrimony. The two plants belong to entirely different orders, the mullein belonging to the order *Scrophulariaceæ*, and the agrimony to the *Rosaceæ* or rose family. This second plant is very sweet-smelling, whilst the mullein is scentless.

'What a lovely scent is in the air! Whatever can it be? The elder has gone off flower, and we are some distance from the river where the meadow sweet is found. Listen!'

'Why listen, to find out what perfume is in the air? What a funny thing to do, Uncle!'

'Listen, Stanley my boy, listen! Can you not hear the music of busy bees in yonder tree? Hark!'

'Yes, I hear a buzzing sound, Uncle; but what of that?'

'Well, that at once identifies the tree, and from that tree—or rather its flowers—comes the sweet perfume. It is a lime tree in most beautiful blossom; the rain early this morning has refreshed the blossoms, and the scent which this flower gives off may now be smelled to perfection. The bees are busy in the honey-laden blossoms, and accompany their diligent work by a continuous lullaby of song. In future, therefore, whenever you smell anything sweet which you think proceeds from

some tree, just open your ears wide and listen for the lullaby of the bees, and you will probably identify the tree as the lime.'

'Uncle, I have been going to speak to you ever so many times during our last few walks and talks about the large number of butterflies I have seen this summer.'

'Well, that's very good, Stanley. I, too, have frequently noticed the number of butterflies to be seen during the day, and the large quantity of moths to be seen flying towards evening. Particularly in the butterfly world, I have noticed the meadow browns and the painted ladies. The latter you might mistake for a large tortoiseshell. There goes one, let me catch her (it must surely be *her*, as the butterfly is called the painted lady, and how could I say, let me catch him?) There, isn't that a lovely butterfly? Notice the spots of white on the tinge of the wings. The painted lady is larger than the large tortoiseshell, expanding from two to two and three-quarter inches. Although such a lovely butterfly, it is common throughout the whole world, South America only excepted. It frequents waste and weedy places, and also our gardens. The larva, or caterpillar, is dark grey, with yellow spots, and it feeds on nettles, thistles, and the like.

'The other evening three beautiful moths came into my room as I was writing. The incandescent

light attracted them, and the window being open they had free access to the room; indeed, that was why I left the window open. The first visitor was a swallow-tail moth, a lovely delicate-coloured moth, being light citron-yellow or brimstone in colour, with two pale olive-brown lines on the fore-wings and one line on the hind-wings. The larva feeds on honeysuckle, lime, etc., and as I have a nice bower of the former in the garden, it may be that the moth which paid me a visit had fed upon the leaves of the plant in my garden.

'Then a little later there came an entirely different moth. It had a very inconspicuous brown colour when its wings were closed, but when it opened them it displayed beautiful yellow hind-wings. This, then, was the common yellow under-wing moth. When I had caught and identified the moth, and let it have its freedom again, it alighted on an old fence, and afterwards on a dull brick wall, and, for the life of me, I couldn't see the insect for a moment or two, so nearly did it match the surroundings.

'My last visitor was a tiger moth, which far outshone the two other visitors as far as its brilliant colours went. The fore-wings were brown with white bands, whilst the hind-wings were bright red, with bluish-black spots. This moth comes from the large hairy caterpillar you sometimes see and which the cuckoo loves. Very few birds

eat these hairy caterpillars, but the cuckoo does not stop at trifles, and eats them greedily. When kept in the larval state and fed upon walnut leaves or plants placed in salt water, this moth emerges quite dark in colour, sometimes nearly black, the result of being fed upon a different diet to that which Nature prescribes for it.'

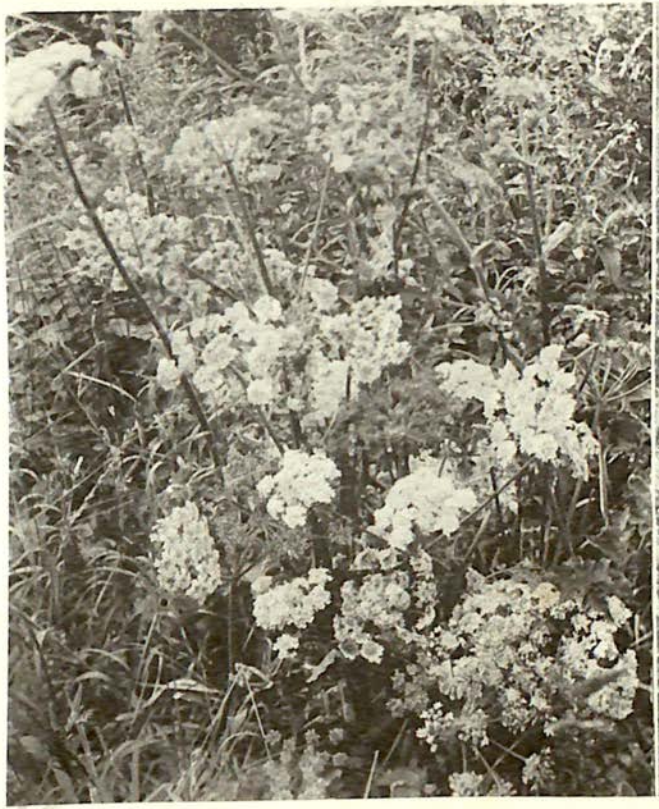


FIG. 72.—COW PARSNIP.

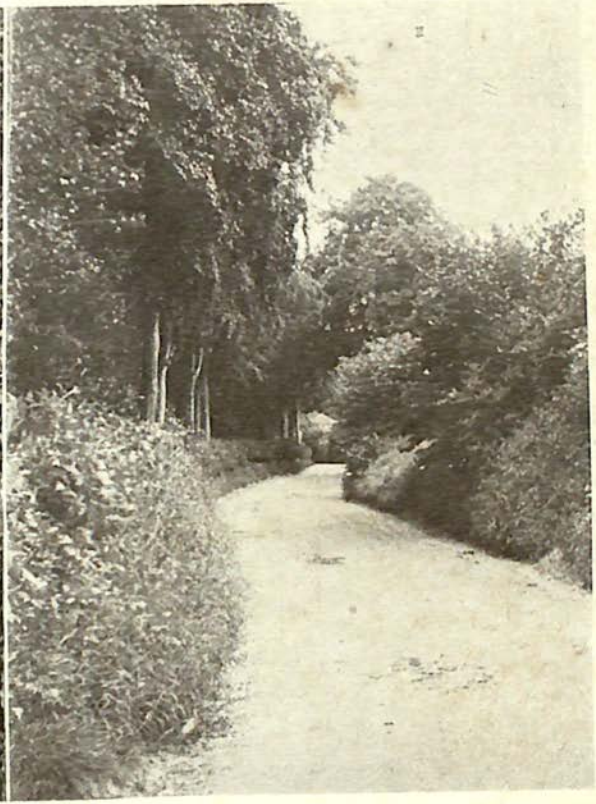


FIG. 73.—A HERTFORDSHIRE LANE.

XXX

JULY—FOURTH WEEK

The Field Convolvulus—Leaf-cutter Bees; they choose Rose-tree Leaves—The Parts of a Plant

'I WANT you particularly to notice to-day, Stanley, how very pretty the white and pink-and-white flowers of the field convolvulus are, because these plants are now quite at their best, and it may be we shall overlook them later in the year. See here along this stony road, where one would think no plant could possibly grow, even if it wished to do so, how the creeping convolvulus is quite covering, with its crafty tendrils, this little-used roadway. It is really astonishing how plants become distributed, and the curious situations in which they are sometimes found. Here, for instance, is the lesser willow herb, a plant which revels in damp surroundings. Yet here it is, growing in a dry, barren-looking roadway, seeming quite healthy and strong.

'It is wonderful how these plants obtain the necessaries of life, and do not wither away and die.

That they do live, and manage to flourish, is proved by the fact that every year more plants than ever are to be seen covering the road. Thistles, scentless mayweed, willow herb, convolvulus, knapweed, dandelions, scabious, crepis, oats, poppies, and coltsfoot are here in abundance, and increasing yearly.

'In the winter this is a happy hunting-ground for some of the seed-eating birds, such as linnets, greenfinches, chaffinches, and goldfinches. The plants having in late autumn mostly gone to seed, the birds, at the first approach of rough weather, draw nearer to the towns and villages, to accept the hospitality found in our gardens and in their near vicinity.'

'Uncle, I saw a bee just now carrying a piece of a leaf. It did look so funny when the bee was flying. Was it going to eat the leaf? If not, what was it going to do with it?'

'Doubtless the bee you saw was one of those known as leaf-cutter bees. I have been watching them these last few days in my garden. I had noticed on several of my rose bushes that some of the leaves had been quite riddled by what I took to be caterpillars, little dreaming that I had yet another rose enemy to deal with. The leaves had small pieces cut out of them about the size of a sixpence, and some of them to which much attention had been paid looked sorry objects indeed.

FIG. 74.—LONG-ROOTED CAT'S EAR.

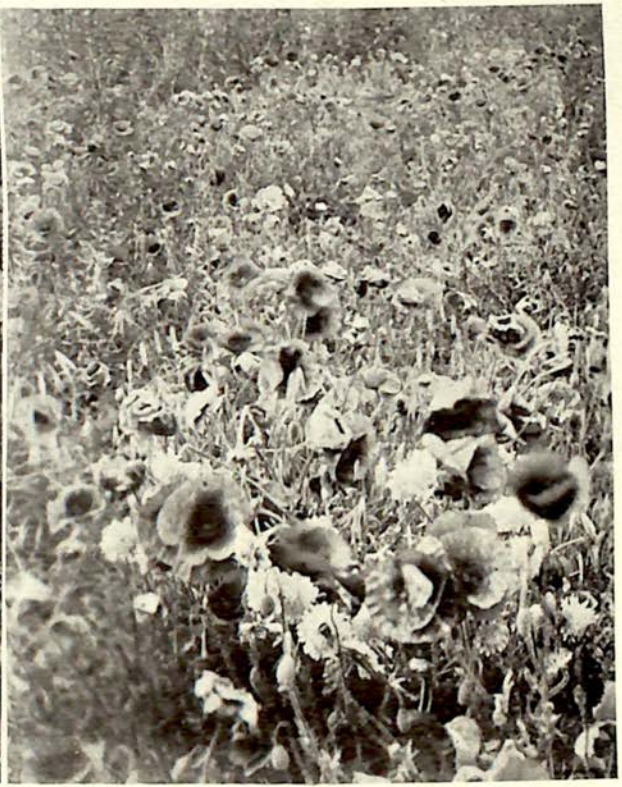


FIG. 75.—SCARLET POPPIES AND FIELD SCABIOUS.

'One day I happened to be sitting in my garden and a bee alighted just in front of me. She—for I have reasons for believing it was a female—was carrying a piece of leaf, and I made her drop it. It proved to be a portion of one of my rose leaves, and the culprit was identified. The bee having lost the piece of leaf went straight back to one of the rose bushes and detached another portion and got safely away with it.

'Now I will tell you why I had reasons for thinking that the bee I saw was a female. These leaf-cutter bees drill a hole in which to lay their egg or eggs, and very often they make a nest of pieces of leaves, the petals of flowers, and other things. It is quite probable that the bee I watched was making a nest wherein to lay her egg, and for this purpose was relieving me of some of my rose leaves. What strikes me as so peculiar is that these bees should prefer attacking my rose bushes, when in my garden there are many plants whose leaves I should not mind them having—nasturtiums, for instance—and yet my choice rose trees are chosen!

'Leaves are most essential parts of a plant. They are the workshops in which the foods from the soil and air are manufactured into compounds, for the use and sustenance of the plant. My rose trees suffer, therefore, if the leaves are attacked in the manner I have described.'

'Please, Uncle, tell me about the use of the other parts of plants—the root, and the stem, and the flowers.'

'Shortly stated, my friend, a plant consists of six parts, thus—

1. Root.	4. Leaves.
2. Stem.	5. Flowers.
3. Branches.	6. Fruit.

'1. *The Root.* The work of the root is to anchor the plant in the soil, and to absorb, by means of little hairs growing on the younger roots, soil foods in solution. Sometimes roots perform other functions; for example, the beet and carrot store up in their roots reserve food which enables the plant to live through the winter and produce flowers and seeds in the second year of its life.

'2. *The Stem* supports the branches which carry the flowers and leaves, and also acts as a conductor of the water containing food from root to leaf.

'3. *The Branches* enable the plant to expose leaf-surface to a considerable area of air, and also to bear flowers and fruit.

'4. *The Leaves,* as I have already told you, are workshops in which the food from the soil and air are manufactured into compounds for the use and sustenance of the plant.

'5. *The Flowers* are the fruit-producers, and they attract insects, which help many species of plants to become fertilized.

'6. *The Fruit* contains the seed which enables the plant to multiply and perpetuate its species.

'Such, briefly outlined, are the functions of the chief parts of plants, and I hope I have explained them in such simple language that you have been able to follow me in what I have stated.'

XXXI

JULY—FIFTH WEEK

Field Nests—The Silencing of the Birds—Harebells—Blackberries—The Fruit Trees—Tadpole before Frog

'THERE are many signs of autumn already, Stanley. The silence of the birds, the scorched pathways, the newly made haystacks where we know none stood last winter; the many wild plants which are now heavily seeded; the trees in the orchards and fruit gardens, laden with fruit; and last, but by no means least, the bare cornfields. The large amount of sunshine we have had this summer has resulted in an early harvest. Already, before July is out, there are many fields of stubble to be seen; and where a few weeks since we noticed a sea of waving ears of oats and corn, now all has been laid bare by the reaper, and a large amount of the precious grain gathered into the harvest home. Many family nurseries of partridges, corncrakes, and other ground-nesting birds have been disturbed by the harvesting operations, and this affects a much

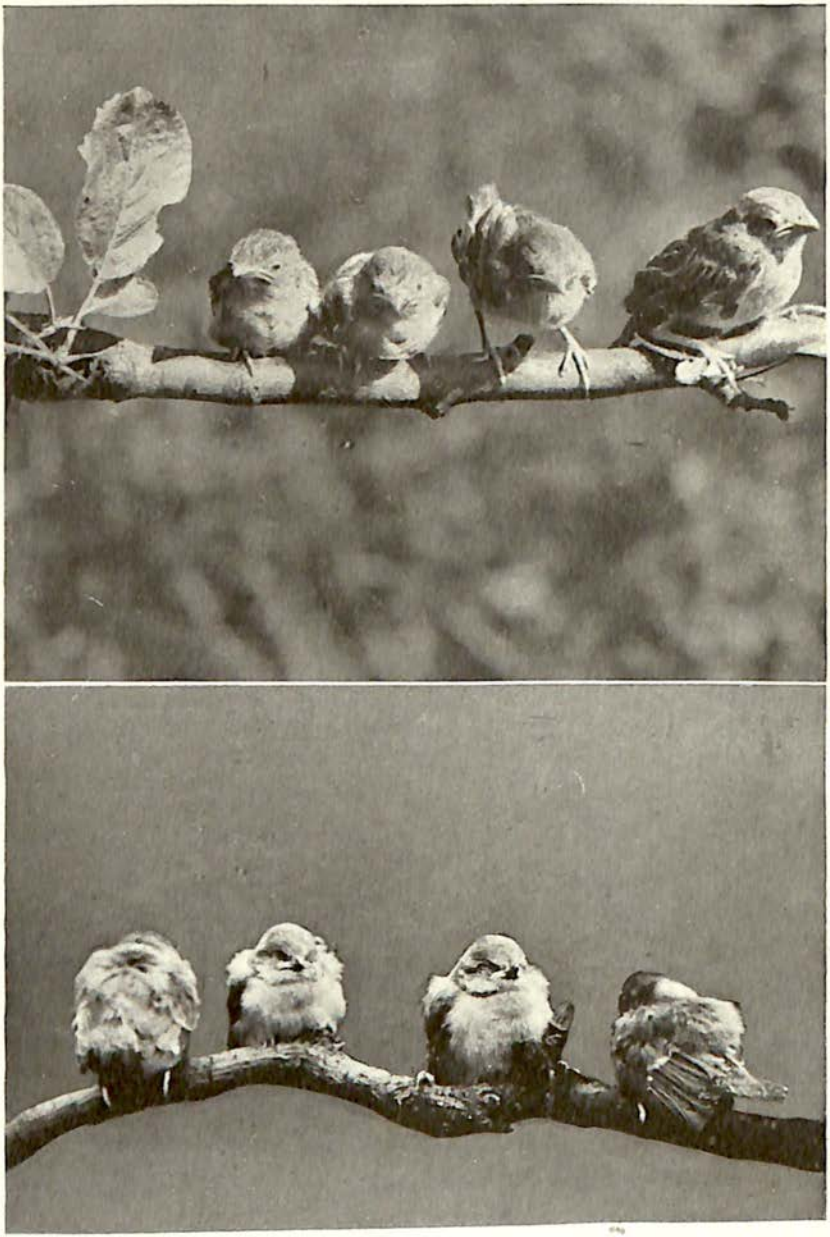


FIG. 76.—YOUNG HOUSE SPARROWS.
FIG. 77.—YOUNG BLUE TITS.

greater number when the harvest is early, as in the present year. Often the birds resort to the last piece of cover left in a hay or corn field, until the very last yard has to be cut. Then there is a tremendous scuttling of wings as the wild tenants of the field have been forcibly evicted from their favourite haunts. It is essential, however, that the precious corn should be gathered in whilst the grain is ripe and the days are long, much as we may regret that as a result many families of birds are cast adrift. How powerful the July sun is, how beautiful the sky, and the gentle breeze which makes the air delightful to breathe and rambling a pleasure! But how silent the birds are! The lark sings on; he is almost the sole feathered minstrel, save for an occasional robin tuning his lute, a hedge-sparrow, or a stray thrush.

'How we remember now the beautiful thrush music we have listened to this year! Do you not look back with pleasure upon what you have enjoyed?'

'I do indeed, Uncle; I have seen and heard so many interesting things that I hardly know which to say I like the best. I do remember, though, the thrush's lovely songs. Can you recite to me some poetry about the thrush, Uncle, please?'

'Yes, I can. Listen to this verse from the pen of Maud Byron—

'"Dear throstle on the birchen bough,
You sing each song twice over—
'Blue violets now!'—'Blue violets now!'
'White clover!'—and 'White clover!'
With silver flute you strive to show
The countless joys of May,
The tender notes come clear and slow,
With a Fa la la, and a Fa la la,
Like a sweet old roundelay."

How do you like that?'

'It is excellent, Uncle. Thank you ever so much. Oh! look here, Uncle, see what pretty blue flowers I have found on this sunny bank! I declare they look just like bells.'

'Those are harebells, Stanley; in other words, the bluebells of Scotland.'

'Then the wild hyacinth, Uncle, is not the bluebell of Scotland; it is the harebell that the Scotch love so.'

'Quite correct, nephew mine.'

'Uncle, just look at these beautiful red berries; and I do believe here is a lovely ripe blackberry. Are the red berries good to eat?'

'No, they are very poisonous. They are the berries of the woody nightshade, and you should never on any account gather them, let alone eat them. The results might prove fatal to you, and you are too precious to us to lose in such a way as that. I am glad you found the first blackberry, because I was going to suggest that we should see who would find the first one. You have beaten

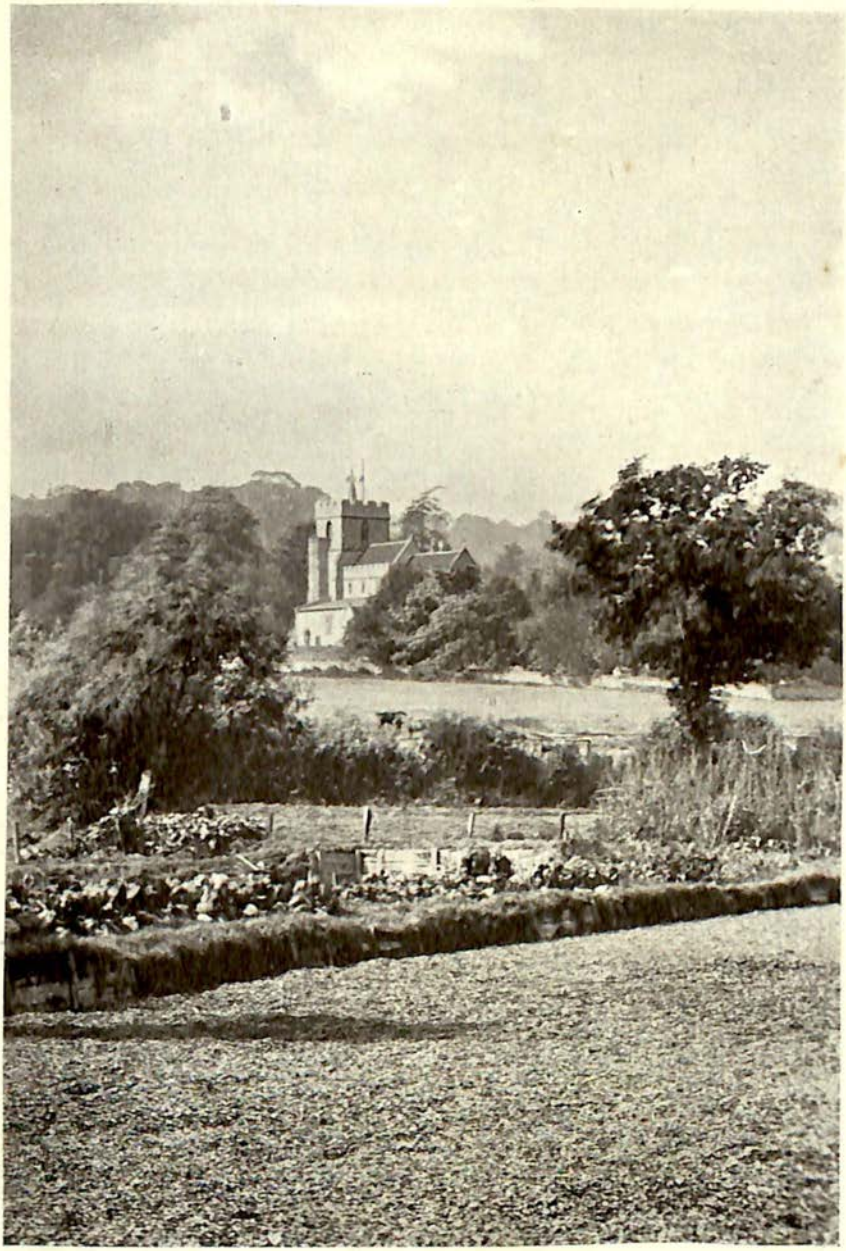


FIG. 78.—A PEACEFUL COUNTRY SCENE.

me fairly, however, and I do not wonder at it, considering how you are quickening your powers of seeing and hearing, and your sense of observation, week by week. When we started our Nature rambles, with their talks, you could hardly grasp all that I pointed out to you; but now really you are quite as quick at seeing and hearing things as I am, and you have indeed been a very apt and satisfactory pupil.

'There seems to be an abundance of blackberries and nuts about; and just look at the wealth of fruit on that beech tree. The boughs hang down heavily under the weight of beech nuts which they carry. The horse chestnut trees, too, are laden with fruit. Later in the year we must search underneath these trees for some ripe chestnuts, which I will thread on a string for you to play "conquers" with during the dull months of the year.'

'Oh! Uncle, quick, quick! here are hundreds of little frogs hopping about the road. Wherever have they come from, and where are they going?'

'They have come from the pond yonder. The parent frogs deposited spawn in the pond, and this hatched out into tadpoles. For some time the black, wriggly little creatures breathed by means of gills, and possessed tails. Gradually legs were formed, the tail started to disappear, and the tadpole was being rapidly transformed into a frog.

Later on, the colour changed, the little creature breathed by means of lungs—like you and I—instead of gills like a fish, and eventually the young frogs left their watery nursery to become tenants on land. Here we have just met a host of them migrating from the pond, to take up their stations in ditches, fields, and gardens. You now see the frog in the very first stage of its existence on land, and very interesting the little creatures are.

'And now, as you have been such a good boy, and carried out my wishes so well, you are to spend a holiday with me by the silver sea. So that our next two or three walks and talks will take place at the seaside. There we shall see quite a number of different things from those we have noticed around our inland home.'

XXXII

AUGUST—FIRST WEEK

Beachy Head—Its Associations—The Formation of the Downs—Fossils—Great Variety of Scenery

AND here we are, Stanley, sitting on the cliffs at the top of Beachy Head, in Sussex, looking across the sparkling waters of the English Channel. This is a lovely spot indeed! Pure air, landscape and seascape views, sea-birds of various species, swallows skimming along over the grassy summit, patches of purple thyme, rest harrow, knapweed, toad-flax, and other wild plants. This Beachy Head is one of the highest points of the South Downs, a bold, rugged, and romantic headland. We are seated here at least 575 feet above sea level, and to-day, being such a clear day, we can see right across the water to the horizon, a distance of nearly thirty miles.

'Shall we look around, and take notice of what can be reached with the naked eye? To the east of us the farthest point which can be seen is Dungeness, in Kent, whilst in the bay may be seen

Hastings, the rising seaside resort of Bexhill, the quaint village of Little Common, and last, the ancient and once important town of Pevensey, now famous for its ruined castle.

'This castle dates back to years before the Norman Conquest, and many a stirring scene has been witnessed there. In 1088, the redoubtable William the Conqueror attacked the castle for several weeks, Bishop Odo having taken refuge within its walls. Later on, in 1114, King Stephen besieged it, but the castle and its defenders proved invulnerable, and it could not be taken by storm. Many other stirring scenes took place at Pevensey Castle in 1265, in 1399; and in the early part of the fifteenth century Joan of Navarre and Edward, Duke of York, were imprisoned there. When the improvements in artillery took place many of these castle strongholds became less important as fortresses, and gradually fell into disuse, and eventually into decay.

'As regards Beachy Head, on the summit of which we are now seated, this calm August day, the fine old headland has been the scene of many events. It was near where we now are that the beacon-fire burned so brightly on the approach of the Spanish Armada, and if you have read your history intently you must try and picture the scene which took place in the days of long ago. Much smuggling has been done here, many wrecks have

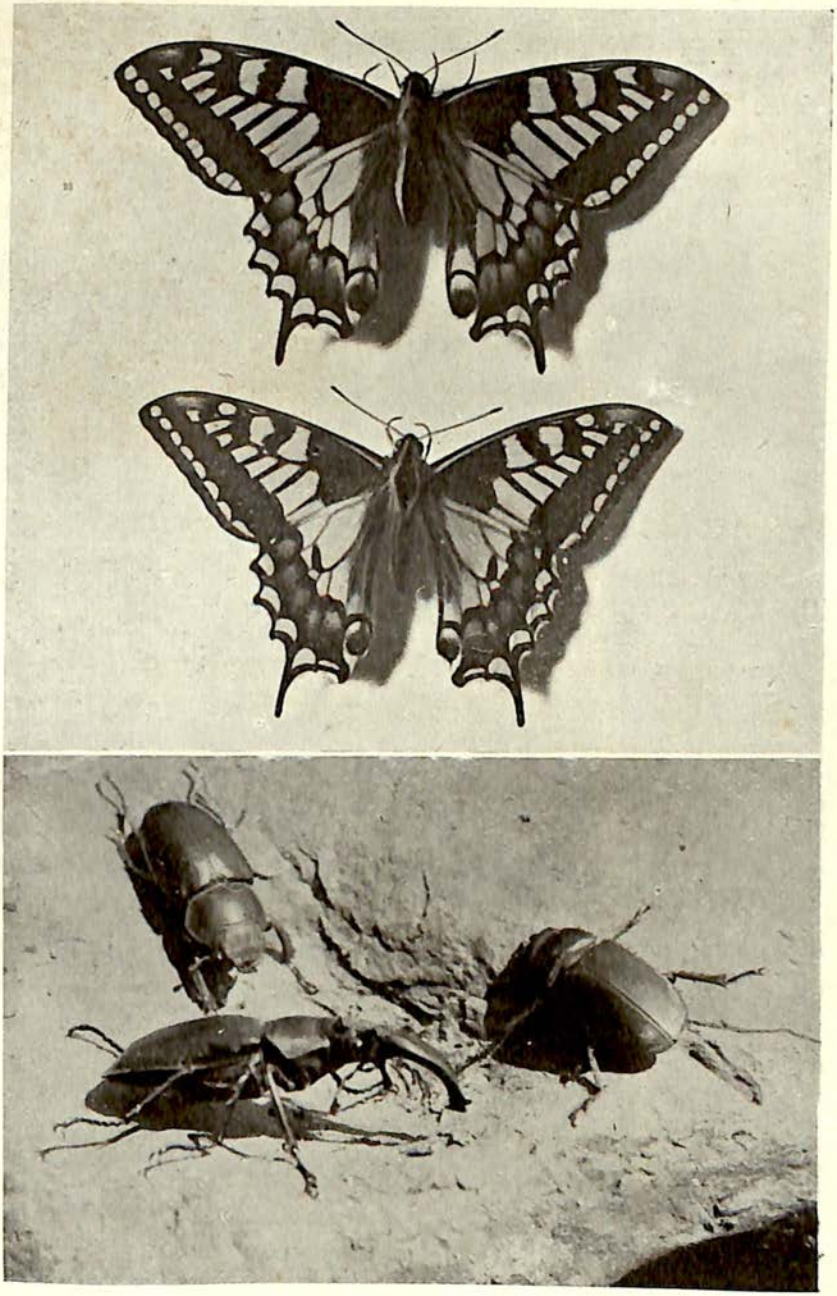


FIG. 79.—SWALLOW-TAILED BUTTERFLIES.
FIG. 80.—STAG BEETLES.

taken place, and a number of fatal accidents have occurred.

'These Downs which we can now see so plainly, and upon one of which we are seated, were the strongholds of the ancient Britons, forefathers of ours of past generations. These ancient Britons have left many traces behind them. There are barrows, hill-forts, and entrenchments, battle-grounds, and tombs. The barrows are the burying-places of these ancient warriors of old, and when excavations have taken place urns have been unearthed containing the bones of some of our forefathers. Near the lighthouse yonder are the remains of what is believed to be a Danish entrenchment, and many prehistoric implements have been unearthed on the Downs. And perhaps you do not know, Stanley, that these far-famed chalk hills of Sussex—better known, perhaps, as the Downs—were formed many, many years ago by countless millions of small shell-fish, tiny little atoms which, when seen singly, would hardly attract attention. Yet, when collected together at the bottom of the sea, they have formed a dense mass of what we call chalk, and the sea at some period has thrown up its chalky bed, and formed these very hills upon one of which we are now seated.'

'And was this big hill under the sea once, Uncle?'

'Yes, indeed it was. The sea has covered a great portion of our country some time in its history. We find fossils of sea-fish and sea-shells many miles inland, thus proving that the sea was once situate where now the land is green and beautiful—meadows and cornfields, woods and valleys, parks and country lanes, rivers and lakes.

'How the time passes! We might spend many days here on top of this mighty headland. Now gazing at a passing steamer, ploughing its way through the green and blue waters of the ocean; now watching a gull sweeping gracefully over the rippling surface of the sea; now watching a blue gem of a butterfly dancing merrily by; now watching the holiday folk away to the east at Eastbourne, the town of palatial hotels and residences; now inhaling the sweet breath of wild flowers, and now listening to the lullaby of the sheepbells and the winged creatures of the air.

'Truly we are in a veritable paradise, and may well say, with Richard Jefferies: "Discover some excuse to be up there always, to search for stray mushrooms—they will be stray, for the crop is gathered extremely early in the morning—or to make a list of flowers and grasses; to do anything, and if not, go always without any pretext. Lands of gold have been found, and lands of spices and precious merchandise; but this is the land of health."'

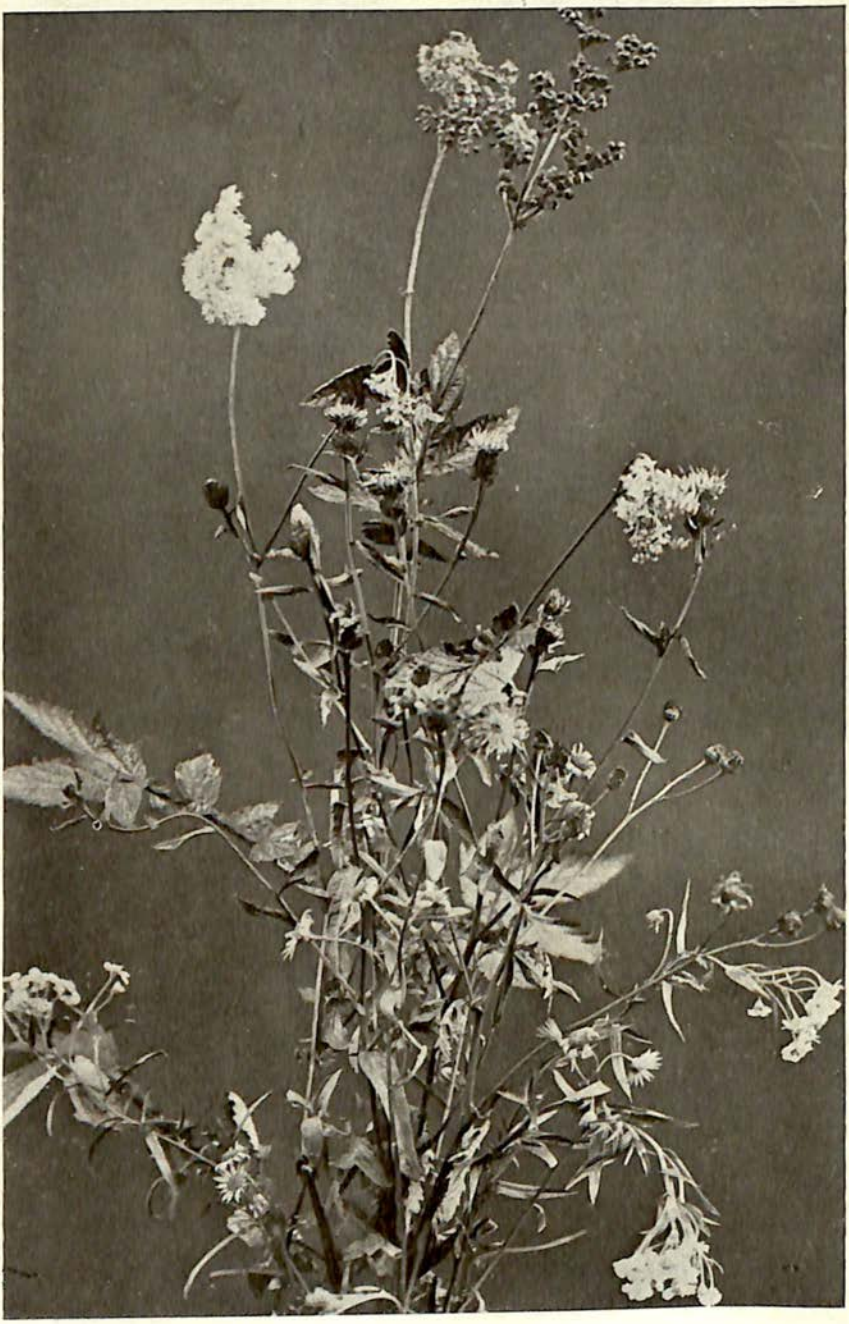


FIG. 81. – MEADOW SWEET.

XXXIII

AUGUST—SECOND WEEK

Downland: its Wild Flowers, its Butterflies, its Birds, and its Views—The Clustered Bell-flower

'YOU have rambled along the seashore, Stanley, and noticed the mussels and the limpets clinging tightly to the water-worn posts and ledges. You have collected a nice variety of shells, and pebbles which have been whitened and rounded by the sea. You have caught little crabs and other forms of marine life, and placed them in your own little pool; built castles on the sand, only to be washed down by the incoming tide; paddled in the refreshing water; watched the pleasure-steamers, the torpedo-boats, and the large liners. Then you have watched the fishermen off the pier-head, observed the gulls sailing majestically over the surface of the ever-moving waters, and been to as many amusements in a few hours as there are days in a week. What a jolly time you have had, and how quickly the time has flown! Now, we have just time for

another ramble. Whither shall it be, seashore or Downland?'

'Oh! Uncle, I like the Downs very much indeed. It is so jolly to be up high, and to breathe the pure air there. And the turf on the Downs does not make me so tired as walking along the shore.'

'Very well, I will comply with your wishes, and to the glorious Downs we will go. What a stiff climb it is to reach the summit, and the dry grass is almost as slippery as ice. Plod on, old fellow, plod on; "slow but sure" is an excellent motto. Rome was not built in a day, you know; strong oaks from little acorns grow.

'Here we are, at last, at the top of one of the highest hills, several hundred feet above sea-level. Two things strike me very much up here on these Sussex Downs; one is the wealth of wild flowers, and the other the abundance of butterflies. The whole of Downland is carpeted—as you see—with the lilac flowers of the small scabious, which is a different plant to the taller field scabious we find at home. This and the dropwort are perhaps the two commonest plants to be found here, although the exquisite heather (there are three kinds on the Downs) and the wild thyme run them very close. Here, from the summit of this high hill, we can see quite a panorama. Hill and valley succeed one another for several miles, and when walking up and

FIG. 82.—STANLEY, THE COMPANION OF MY RAMBLES.
FIG. 83.—TIGER MOTH ON WALLFLOWER.

down these hills distance is very deceptive. Here is an extremely pretty flower we do not find at home, the clustered bell-flower.'

'Why, I declare, Uncle, it is like a small canterbury bell.'

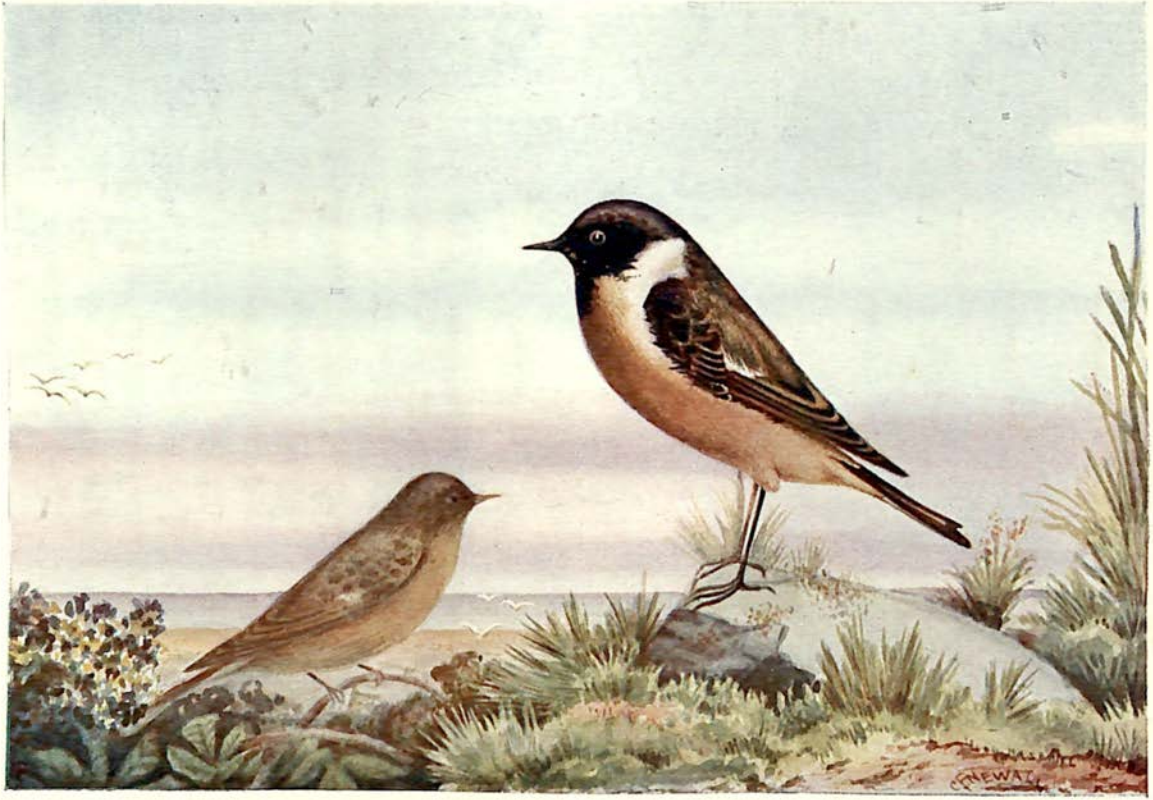
'Very like it indeed, as you have correctly stated, although on the Downs this plant does not attain a great height; indeed, many of the plants seem stunted in their growth, probably because of their exposed positions, and the soil not being of any great depth. Notice on the sides of the sheltered hills and in the valleys how much finer the plants are, and what a floral picture is to be seen when one looks down a hillside.

'And what shall we say of the butterfly life? How delicious in colour the chalk-hill blue butterfly is, as compared with the much darker colour of the common blue; but the adonis blue is really the most beautiful of them all. Then you will remember me showing you at home a few painted lady butterflies, but we have never seen them in such large numbers as on the Sussex Downs. There goes a clouded yellow butterfly, the first one we have seen out; here is a grayling flying along on tremulous wings; there one of the fritillaries; whilst meadow-browns, whites, and others rise almost everywhere as we proceed along. Stand still a moment, and cast your eyes around in a

circle. What a number of butterflies may be observed resting on, and amongst the herbage!

'Nearly all' the birds here on these hills are silent. The commonest species seem to be linnets (and with such rosy-red breasts), greenfinches, stonechats, meadow pipits, common and yellow buntings.

'This is a good fox country, and there are a large number of rabbits. For miles we may ramble and never light upon a house, save for an occasional farmhouse, or some tiny hamlet nestling in the valley below. To the west of us is Newhaven, an important seaport town, and that high hill yonder is Firle Beacon, one of the highest points on the Downs. Now we have reached the Cuckmere Valley, and after a refreshing cup of tea we will ramble by the Cuckmere River, and thence homewards.'



STONECHATS.

XXXIV

AUGUST—THIRD WEEK

An Uncommon Plant, the Alpine Woundwort—The South Down Sheep—How Plants escape them

AND here we are, Stanley, home again, after our brief but enjoyable and interesting sojourn in Sussex. Our note-books show that we were not idle while we were in the neighbourhood of Downland. I have totalled up the number of different plants and birds which we identified. The plants reach a total of over two hundred species, and the birds number forty species. Those two lists alone, to say nothing of butterflies and other insects, a few mammals and reptiles, show that we made the most of our wanderings, and used our eyes and ears to great advantage.

'You will, I know, be pleased to hear that one of the plants we found—the alpine woundwort—has only previously been recorded from one part of our country, namely, Gloucestershire. You will remember when we rambled in the beautiful Cuckmere Valley, and by the banks of the Cuckmere

River, I drew your attention to a strange plant growing by itself just off a much-frequented path. At first sight, perhaps, the plant would be mistaken for the common and very abundant hedge stachys, or woundwort, but the deep purple colour of the flowers, and the more uncommon look about the whole plant, arrested my attention.

'Probably no botanist had chanced to pass that way, and the plant, not being at all attractive-looking to those who do not possess the seeing eye, had escaped attention. It is curious that one may often find rare plants growing in much-frequented places, and it is a thousand pities that people do not search these common grounds more diligently than they do. For instance, although we rambled a long distance across those lovely Sussex Downs, far away from the haunts of the holiday folk and the cheap trippers, it was left for us to have our best botanical capture close by a well-trodden path leading up to Alfriston, reckoned among the prettiest of Sussex villages.'

'Uncle, what flowers upon the Downs attracted your attention most? I mean compared with those we find at home in Hertfordshire.'

'That is a question, young fellow, difficult to answer in a few sentences. Perhaps the great abundance of the dropwort, the dear little squinancy-wort, the beautiful clustered bell-flower, the delightful pink and white umbel head of the burnet

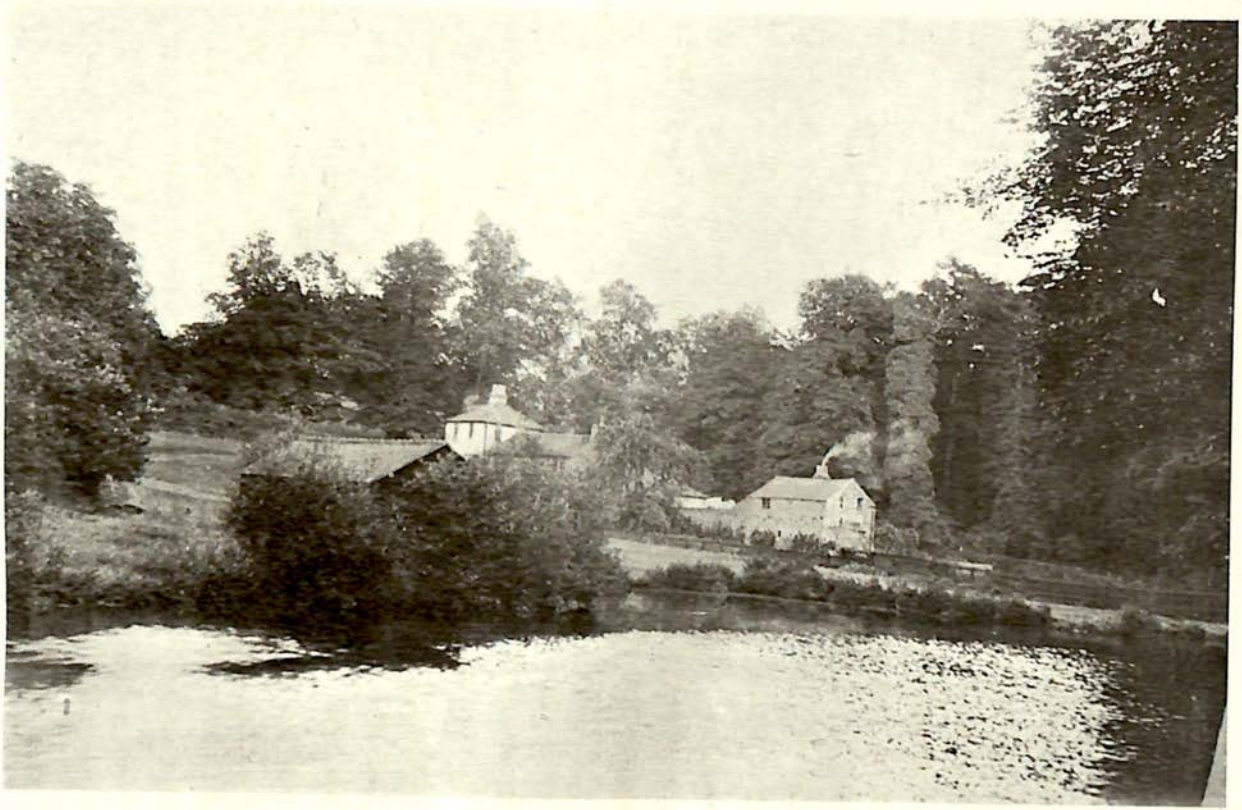


FIG. 84.—THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY.

saxifrage, the wild thyme and the heather, the sheep's bit scabious, and the viper's bugloss, the yellow wort, and the horned poppy, chiefly attracted my notice, although some of these floral treasures of the country-side we find at home, but not in such abundance. For instance, we get in Hertfordshire the wild thyme, the heather, and the viper's bugloss, but not in such luxuriance or beauty of coloration.

'None of the other plants that I have mentioned have so far been recorded by me as being found at home, and the memories of the several new species we met with will always pleasantly remain, and recall many interesting mementos of our Nature rambles in Downland.

'What struck me also with regard to the plants found immediately on the Downs was the manner in which they prostrated themselves, so as to survive the nibbling South Down sheep. Doubtless, the presence of these famous sheep, the shallowness of the soil upon the chalk, and the open situations, account, more or less, for the dwarfing of many of the plants to be found there. Moreover, the manner in which many of them contrive to exist, and thwart the efforts of the nibbling sheep by spreading their leaves flatly over the ground, instead of rising as they do from the base of the plant, when no sheep or other animals are liable to destroy them, was of great interest.

'Many parts of the Downs, indeed, seem to me to represent a huge floral carpet in which the flowers and plants are let in as part of the whole wonderful design, a series of beautiful patterns and designs all deftly woven by the Great Designer Whose works we revere, Whose creations we endeavour to study. The plants on these hills have so fashioned themselves as to become part and parcel of Downland, portions of its living garment, as it were, and afford us many interesting object-lessons as to how even plants—which some people regard as dull, inanimate objects—adapt themselves to their environment; which means their surroundings. I hope I have explained myself in language so simple that you can understand and comprehend my meaning? Have I?'

'Yes, Uncle, I follow you exactly. You mean that if some of the plants we found on the Downs had the same habits as the same plants have when growing elsewhere, the sheep would be able to eat them, and so the plants would find it difficult to live, so that the Downland plants—or many of them—become very dwarf in their habits, spread their leaves artfully over the ground, and the sheep have to bite very close to the ground to do them any harm.'

'Really, Stanley, you have become quite a clever philosopher, and I could not have put the matter in clearer or simpler language myself.'

'And the birds, Uncle, what struck you particularly about those we saw on the Downs?'

'Shortly stated, the corn buntings and the stonechats quickly attracted my notice, because we rarely see these two species at home, and the abundance of meadow pipits also demanded my attention. Then in the marshes down in the valleys the dapper little ringed plovers, redshanks, and sandpipers added fresh interest in bird life to that we see at home; and in the butterfly world the number of blues, clouded yellows, painted ladies, and other species, call for special mention. Such is a very brief review of a few of Downland's Nature-treasures, of which we both retain such pleasant recollections.'

XXXV

AUGUST—FOURTH WEEK

The Awakening of the Birds—Preparing for Flight—Partridges and Pheasants—The Young Cuckoo's Crossing—Struck by Lightning—Ploughing—The Nut Hazel—Chestnuts

'ONE thing you will notice very prominently now, Stanley, as you ramble with me along the countryside, and that is the awakening of the birds. True, our favourite, the skylark, is still silent, but the robin is singing most sweetly his autumn song. I always think that the lyrics of the redbreast during August are a striking reminder of the approach of autumn. Notice, too, how very noisy several of the titmice have become, and that although winter seems a long way off the blue tits have returned to our gardens, and will soon look for the tasty suet which we place in the cocoa-nut shells for them.

'Then, too, you must note the singing of the chiff-chaff and the willow warbler, two of our summer visitors, who will soon be setting out on their long and arduous journeys across the seas and

FIG. 85.—THE HAUNT OF WILD FOWL.

foreign lands. It is very pleasant to hear them singing again during August and September; it reminds us of the springtime, and it will be at least six months before we hear their welcome voices again.'

'The partridges whirr away as we walk over the stubbles, and proud, haughty pheasants strut along by the edge of the wood, where they are to remain until the fateful day arrives for shooting them. The jays have suddenly found their voices again and shriek loudly as we pass through the woodland. The swallows and the martins are rapidly preparing for their journey across the sea; the swifts have already gone, departing as silently as they came. It is all very wonderful, isn't it?

'Just consider, for a moment, how the young cuckoos find their way across seas and lands which they have never crossed before. The adult cuckoos —or most of them—have gone some time before the young ones are ready to commence their wonderful and perilous voyage, and they have nothing to guide them during their wanderings! Yet these young cuckoos find their way to their winter home, and return again the following spring. To leave the birds, just notice there, along that sun-kissed side of the wood, the number of foxgloves which are still blossoming. They seem loth to bid adieu to the departing summer, and will please us with their pink flowers for a week or two yet.

'Here is a tree which I have brought you to see. Doesn't it look a sorry picture indeed?'

'Whatever has happened to it, Uncle? Oh! what a shame!'

'The tree has been struck by lightning, Stanley, and a sad wreck it has become. See, it has been splintered right down the centre, and one whole side has broken off and fallen in the surrounding woodland. Notice towards the base of the tree how the trunk is splintered into matchwood, and how terribly the lightning has performed its work.

'It is an ash tree, and, being in a particularly sheltered part of the wood, it is curious that this tree should have been singled out by the lightning on which to play such havoc. It was an especially fine tree for an ash, and affords an example to us of how dangerous it is to seek shelter under a tree during a storm. It is far better to risk getting wet through, and stand in the middle of a field, than to stand under a tree during a thunderstorm; and you would do well to bear this in mind, if ever you are caught in a storm. The chances are that, if any one had been anywhere near that ash tree, they would have been instantly killed. How bare the countryside is now! The flowers and grasses by the hedgerows have been laid low, the fields of corn have been cleared, and all is stubble.

'In some fields the plough has already been at

FIG. 86.—A GROUP OF MUSHROOMS

work, preparing for a fresh crop, and very sweet the newly turned-up earth is as compared with the brown and dead-looking stubble. Wild-flowers—excepting where the scythe has not been at work—are few and far between, and in the woods all is silent save for the voices of a few birds already mentioned.

'There is a death-like stillness in those woodland glades which teemed with happy songs of many birds in the springtime, save for a few rabbits, which scamper away at our approach, or a weazel or a stoat out hunting for food.

'You will remember how I pointed out to you in the springtime the great wealth of male and female nut-hazel blossom. Now you may see the result. The nuts hang in rich clusters, and in a few days' time we shall be able to fill our pockets with the fruit. See, too, how the horse-chestnut trees bear a quantity of prickly cradles in which the chestnuts are quickly forming. When the leaves turn yellow and golden, then we may search underneath the trees for the fallen fruit.

'The blackberries are ripening fast, and to all appearances there will be an exceptionally heavy crop. It is a pity that this luscious fruit is not gathered more by country people, and that so many berries are allowed to remain on the bushes only to spoil. We do not in this country make half enough of the wild fruits that flourish by the country-side.

Some day we shall awake to this fact, and garner in more of Nature's treasures than we do.

'The fungus season is at hand, and many trees proclaim the rapid march of autumn. The nights are longer and colder; there is a smell of autumn in the air, summer has sped away, and its lease—as Shakespeare truly says—has all too short a date.'

XXXVI

SEPTEMBER—FIRST WEEK

The Red Admiral Butterfly—Our Cottage Gardens—The Toadflax—The Lake—Moorhens—Wild Ducks—Sunbeams—Sunset

'JUST look, Stanley, at that red admiral butterfly resting upon that large flat head of cow-parsnip blossom! Does it not look really lovely? It shines like an exquisite jewel in the September sunshine. Truly the sight of this beautiful British butterfly reminds one of the glories of summer now departed. Although quite a common butterfly, when one sees the red admiral to such perfection as this, it must be voted amongst the choicest insects we possess. And, I say, Stanley, look at the cottage gardens! Are they not a feast of colour? Giant cactus dahlias—from dark red to pure white—all colours of the rainbow excepting green—sulphur-yellow, pink, red, purple, crimson. The asters and the phloxes, too, make a brave show; and notice, also, how the roses bloom in these cottage gardens.

'Truly it is quite delightful to see their occupants take so much interest in their gardens, especially at this season of the year. It is worth tramping many a mile, solely to see these floral pictures. What democrats flowers are! Here, in this poor man's garden, the flowers grow as well—if not better—than in the well-tended gardens of the rich. And more than this, the poor man's flowers look so much more real, more natural, more becoming than the artificial, stiff appearance which they often bear in the grounds of the squire.

'Coming back to Nature's garden, what a brave show the toadflax still makes along the country-side! It seems very loth to cease flowering, and appears to be exerting all its energy to blooming profusely ere the first frost cuts it asunder. Really, amongst our British wild flowers, I do not think there is a more beautiful sulphur-yellow, or one which presents a more pleasing colour to the eye. The purple heads of the knapweed, too, show up very prominently now, and I notice the humble bees are very fond of visiting these flowers during the autumn time.

'Here we have reached a large sheet of water, upon which there is a most pleasing ripple, giving the lake the appearance of a miniature sea. Notice the boating parties upon the lake. How they are enjoying themselves! On the far side of the water I can espy a punt moored near a favourite fishing

FIG. 87.—HAUNT OF THE SEDGE WARBLER.

place. Seated in the punt is a patient angler, happy and contented, whether he enjoys any sport or not.

'What interests us most, however, are the dapper little moorhens dabbling after food, and playing hide-and-seek amongst the rushes. Several wild duck are here as well, and in the winter many rare birds alight and stay for some time. This particular sheet of water rarely, if ever, becomes frozen over, and these winter bird visitors levy heavy toll upon the small fish which abound here.

'How lovely the sunbeams sparkle across the water! and notice the effect of the setting sun upon the glass windows of the large house on the hill yonder. It seems as if the house is decorated with fairy-lamps, and the effect is really beautiful. Look at the sunbeams on the rippling pool, shining and twinkling like thousands of stars, reminding us of the moonbeams which we observed upon the silver sea. And what a beautiful sunset! A blue sky, tinged with pink, red, and white. The sun is sinking rapidly in the west like a ball of gold, and reflecting upon the sky the most pleasing colours it is possible to imagine. Take your eyes away for a moment or two, and the whole scene is changed. The pink has disappeared, and now it is a mackerel sky, blue and white! Change after change takes place, scene after scene, panorama after panorama, all carried out by an unseen Hand. No hurry, no

excitement, no bustle, and yet all exquisitely grand, inspiring, soul-stirring, wonderful.

'We have enjoyed many rich sunsets recently; and an autumn setting of the sun is really one of the most charming sights in the whole realm of Nature. Too, often, however, people neglect to lift their eyes above the earth to notice the lovely scenes to be observed in the clouds. Rolling mountains, vast plains, seas, all are pictured for us, and afford food for thought to any intelligent person. There is beauty above us and around us—beauty everywhere in Nature; if we do but use our eyes and ears correctly.'

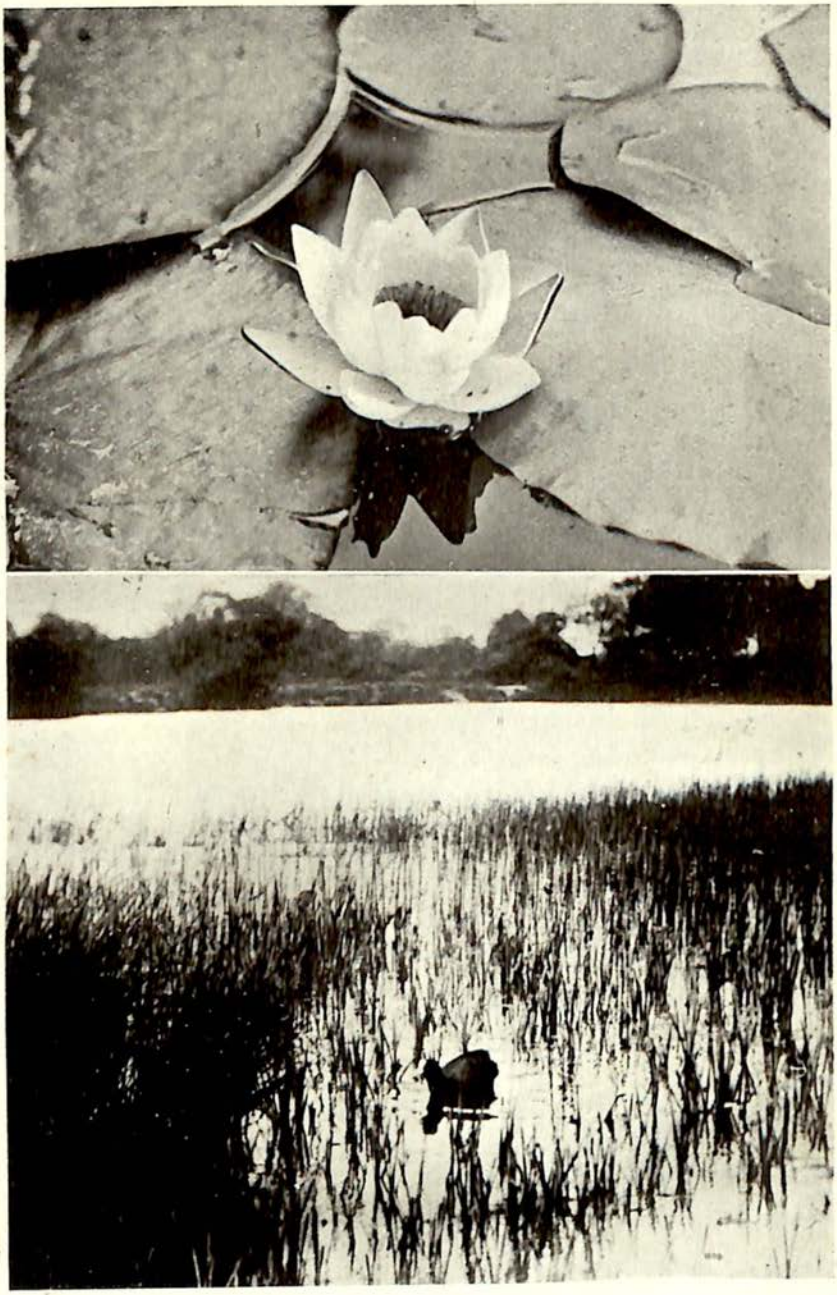


FIG. 88.—WHITE WATER LILY.
FIG. 89.—COOT SWIMMING IN A REED-BED.

XXXVII

SEPTEMBER—SECOND WEEK

Mushrooms — Their Variety — Swallows — Martins — Autumn Signs — Wild Fruits — The Jackdaw — Cowper's Eulogy

NOW you can see in the woods, Stanley, and in the meadows bordering them, the proud, stately pheasants walking about with measured tread. These are the same birds that you saw, many weeks ago, being reared by the gamekeeper. Then they were tiny little mites, now they have grown up to be large, brown, speckled birds, and in a few weeks' time pheasant shooting will commence.

'Notice by the side of this wood quite a company of young pheasants—thirty or forty in number. There are also several rabbits, blackbirds, and thrushes, all mixed up together, and not fearing one another in the least. Their feelings towards us are quite the opposite. Should any of the furred or feathered gathering catch sight of us, away they will scamper and fly, helter skelter, into

the woodland. Although there are many birds and mammals which prey upon one another on occasions like the present, it is very pleasant to reflect upon the good feeling that exists between different species of animals.

'We are close by the green parkland; and, see, here is quite a ring of mushrooms, looking like a small company of white fairies. These are edible, or eatable, mushrooms, and we will gather some for our breakfast in the morning. Be careful in picking them, as there are several species of fungi growing here also, which it would hardly be safe to risk eating, as they might be poisonous.'

'Uncle, is there only one sort of mushroom good to eat?'

'By no means, my dear fellow, is this the case. There are over thirty species of fungi which have been proved to be edible, or good to eat, but unless one makes a study of them it is difficult to distinguish between them.

'You will notice that many of the luscious edible mushrooms have been trodden upon or knocked over by the sheep which graze here, and also that the slugs feed upon these mushrooms, too.

'How pleasant it is to watch the swallows and the martins skimming gracefully across the park, and to listen to the shrill alarm notes of the former as they pass and repass us. See how much more quick and adroit the swallow is in its flight than

FIG. 90.—A BEECH WOOD.

the martin, and how it twists and turns much more frequently and more easily. The martin, when seen upon the wing, does not seem so elastic-like as its near relative, from which it may be distinguished by the more catapult-forked tail, and the prominent white rump, which is displayed when the bird is flying.

'The autumn tints are rapidly coming along now, Stanley, and, if this wet, windy weather continues, the beautiful autumn effects will not be nearly so fine as they would be if Dame Nature had approached her autumntide slowly, and at her ease. Already many of the wall-creepers are deeply and highly scarleted, and the first sharp night's frost will send the summer mansions toppling to the ground.

'The ground in many places is strewn with various kinds of wild fruits. Beech nuts, horse chestnuts, acorns, crab apples, and other wild fruits of the countryside are to be seen underneath most of these trees now, but, should we have heavy rain, and then a blustering wind, the fruits—acorns and chestnuts especially—will fall to the ground in great quantities, and if one of the fruits happens to strike you on the face whilst passing, you will receive quite a sting.

'The keepers have told me recently, Stanley, of the great havoc the jackdaws have wrought amongst the young pheasants this summer, and although we

regret that the bird should commit such damage, we still retain a warm place in our affections for this intelligent, sagacious feathered creature, so much so, that I think it will please you if I recite, in conclusion, the clever lines written by the poet about this bird. Listen to what Cowper has written about the jackdaw :—

'"There is a bird, that, by his coat,
And by the hoarseness of his note,
Might be supposed a crow;
A great frequenter of the church,
Where, bishop-like, he finds a perch,
And dormitory too.
Above the steeple shines a plate
That turns and turns, to indicate
From what point blows the weather;
Look up—your brains begin to swim;
'Tis in the clouds—that pleases him;
He chooses it the rather.
Fond of the speculative height,
Thither he wings his airy flight;
And thence securely sees
The bustle and the raree-show
That occupy mankind below—
Secure, and at his ease.
You think, no doubt, he sits and muses
On future broken bones and bruises,
If he should chance to fall;
No, not a single thought like that
Employs his philosophic pate,
Or troubles it at all.
He sees that this great roundabout,
The world, with all its motley rout,
Church, army, physic, law,
Its customs and its businesses
Are no concern at all of his;
And says—What says he?—'Caw'!

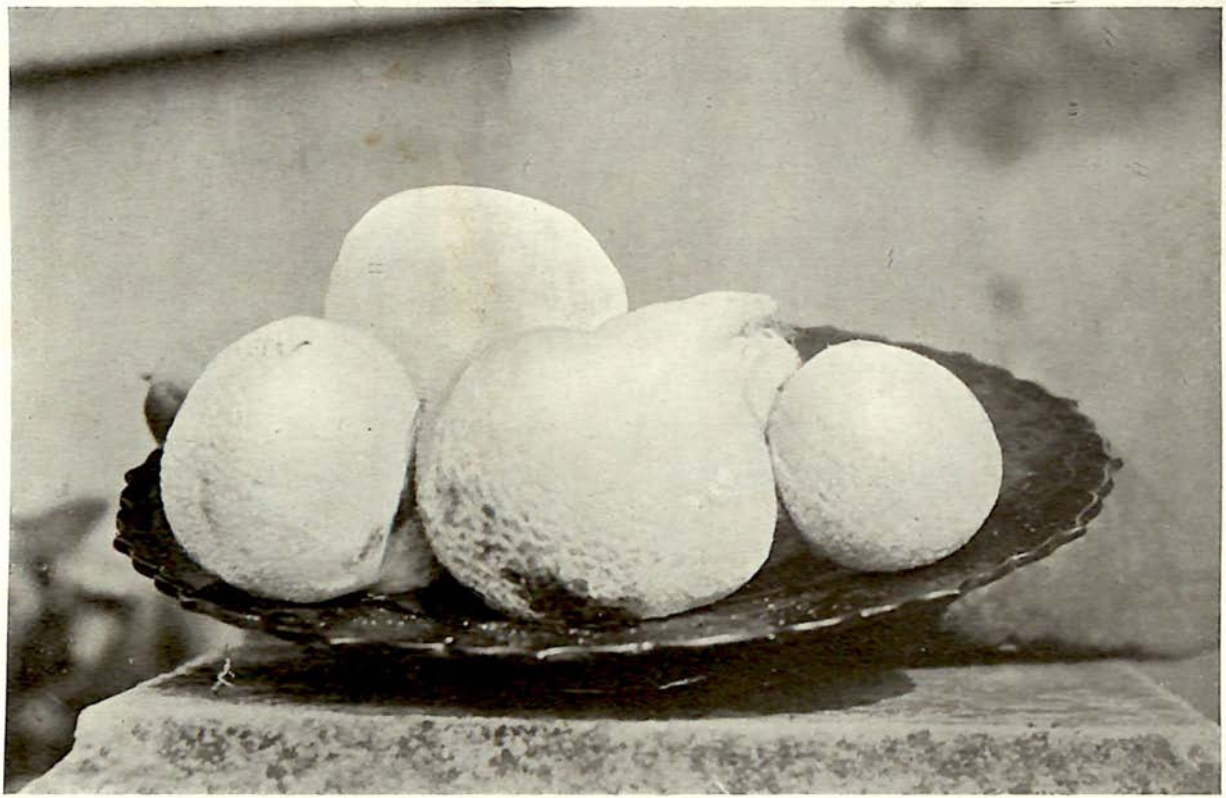


FIG. 91.—A DISH OF FUNGI.

Thrice happy bird! I, too, have seen
Much of the vanities of men;
  And, sick of having seen them,
Would cheerfully these limbs resign,
For such a pair of wings as thine,
  And—such a head between them!"'

XXXVIII

SEPTEMBER—THIRD WEEK

Bees—The Red Admiral, Garden White, and Tortoiseshell Butterflies—The Beauty of Autumn—The Catkins again

'ALTHOUGH during a previous ramble, Stanley, you will remember we were attracted by the beauty of the red admiral butterfly, really we cannot let this thirty-eighth walk and talk pass by without noticing the number of these insects still upon the wing, and their exquisite colours.

'So, too, there are a number of large garden whites flying about the garden, and still more of the small tortoiseshell. Just look here at this large pink head of flowers of the sedum; there is quite a gathering of the insect clans—two small tortoiseshells, two red admirals, an exquisite little green fly dazzling like some precious stone in the September sunshine, a honey and a humble bee. Just watch the red admiral carefully, and you will notice how busily the insect is thrusting its long

tongue, or proboscis, down to the base of the flower to procure food. Is not the tongue a thin delicate organ? Nevertheless, it is extremely sensitive. See, too, the tortoiseshells are equally industrious; likewise the bees.

'The butterflies, however, seem to get more result from their labours than the bees, as their longer tongues enable them to reach the base of the flower, where the honey glands are secreted. So intent are the insects upon their work—making hay whilst the sun shines, so to speak—that they permit us to bend right over them and watch them at their clever task. The red admiral is especially tame, and will not fly away even if the hand be moved just above it. It has probably fed so ravenously upon the honey secreted in the flowers as to become stupefied. I never remember seeing butterflies so tame before, and it is a thousand pities our camera is not in position, to enable us to secure a picture of this very interesting insect gathering.

'The flowers of the countryside are becoming fewer every week now; hence these butterflies pay our gardens a visit and take toll from the flowers still blooming. They seem especially fond of the flowers of the sedum, and one or more may be seen upon the large pink heads of blossom almost any time during the day.

'We have recently enjoyed, as you know, most

lovely September weather, with hours of brilliant sunshine. This accounts for the sudden reappearance of a number of butterflies who, during the wet weather we previously experienced, had hied away to some secure retreat. The brilliant sunshine has, however, tempted them out from their hiding-places, and they are making haste to have a good feast, whilst still there is food in Nature's larder for them to sip.

'The mellow days of September, with their tinted leaves of red and yellow, bronze and gold, are to be numbered amongst the most enjoyable of Nature's year. Perhaps they do not compare with the glorious excitement and fresh green of spring, but they far excel the full glow of summer in their temperateness, mellowness, and quiet beauty. A wet, blustering, dismal autumn may be reckoned as worse than the bleakness of winter, or November fogs and cold; but a mellow, sunshiny autumn is most enjoyable.

'September is not very old as yet, the nuts are even now not what may be called dead ripe, nor can we find many of them to "slip-shell" easily.

'Fancy, the male blossoms of next spring are already showing themselves! On this tree there are many short, stubby little catkins, which will be pleasing to us early next spring, when they are yellow and laden with precious pollen. We regard

FIG. 92.—IVY ON OAK TREE.

FIG. 93.—THE LANE WHERE WE RAMBLED.

them even now in early autumn as pleasing harbingers in the plant world of happy days to come; and they strikingly remind us of the great cagerness with which Nature reproduces herself. I remember last year observing the male catkins much later in the year, and September 17 has set up a fresh record for my Nature note-book.

'It seems strange to those who have the seeing eye to observe signs of next spring ere autumn's lease has run out; but here you may see them with your own eyes, and, with me, be cheered, as they encourage us to expect brighter and better days.'

'And when shall we see the female blossoms, Uncle, like you pointed out to me early this year?'

'Probably not until after Christmas. By January these stumpy little "lambs' tails" will have grown into long pendulous catkins, and as soon as the anthers are ready to shed their contents (pollen), then you may with certainty pull down the branches and search for the little red tufts of female blossom. It is all in the natural order of things. It would be unwise for the female blossoms—the pistillate flowers, you will remember, I called them earlier in the year—to open until the male blossoms were ready to deliver up the precious and essential pollen dust, and I have never yet observed any female flowers previous

to the ripeness of the male blossoms. This may seem a trivial comment; but if you reflect upon it for a moment or two, and endeavour to reason out the why and the wherefore, the cause and the effect, a very wonderful object-lesson is easily presented.'

THE HUMMING-BIRD HAWK-MOTH.

Two perfect insects, larvæ and pupæ (earlier and later stages). Nearly life size.

XXXIX

SEPTEMBER—FOURTH WEEK

Woodland once more—The Struggle for Existence—The Battle not always to the Strong—Early Autumn Dresses—The Beech Mast—Ragwort—St. John's Wort

'THIS wood in which we now stand, Stanley, we visited, you will remember, in the springtime. Then the ground was carpeted with primroses and other woodland-loving plants. What a change may now be seen! The undergrowth has grown up to such an extent that we hardly seem to recognize the place again. It is wonderful how quickly a patch of woodland which has been cut down grows up again, first into young trees and bushes, then into fine stalwart giants.

'There is a great struggle for existence going on, and the strongest—the fittest, is the word more usually employed—will eventually prevail, and the weakest perish. Notice the great battle of the plants which is being fought in this little patch of woodland. No noise, no bustle, no excitement, but yet as serious and as extraordinary a fight as was

ever waged on a human battle-field. Plant throttles plant; the couch-grass craftily stabs a potato tube through its heart; they wrestle with one another in their endeavours to exist, and many evidences are here—on the nearest bank or piece of waste ground—of the great struggle which is continually being waged in the plant world.

'The dandelion and the daisy, two of our commonest wild plants, are very clever captains in the plant army. Their firm rosette of leaves, at the base of the plant, may be described as a very secure and well-built fort, through which it is almost impossible for any plant foe to penetrate.

'The goosegrass artfully creeps over the surrounding herbage; the honeysuckle contrives to cling round and strangle stronger plants than itself; so does the bryony, the traveller's joy, the wild rose, and other inhabitants of the plant world. These things are very wonderful, and deserving of much attention. They are all too generally overlooked, rarely thought of, in fact, and many people, on having their attention drawn to them, can but exclaim, "Wonderful!" No matter where we turn—to birds, insects, mammals, fish, plants, reptiles, etc.—it is all a case of the survival of the fittest; the weakest goes to the wall.

'Let us change the subject, Stanley, shall we? and watch the autumn tints which are already promised. The beech tree appears to be amongst

the earliest to assume its autumn dress, and when the wind blows the leaves come toppling to the ground, like so many yellow and red butterflies. The ground is strewn with the beech mast, and as we cycle or walk over the fruit the masts explode with quite a loud report.

'Although September has nearly sped away, the countryside still wears a pleasant, green look. The meadows, from which the hay has been gathered, look quite fresh again, and contrast with the yellow of the straw stacks. The nuts are falling rapidly from their husk cradles, and now and then a squirrel may be seen scampering along the ground, evidently in search of the nuts to hide away for food during winter.

'See here, in this field, the brownish plants of ragwort and St. John's wort, two plants, both bearing yellow flowers, but belonging to entirely different orders. The ragwort is what is known as a composite flower, like the daisy and the dandelion, whilst the St. John's worts—for there are several British species—are accorded an order of their own, known as *Hypericum*. This particular species is the perforated St. John's wort, and although the leaves are fast browning and dying off, you can still see the perforations in the leaves, like little pinholes, hence the first part of the plant's name.

'This is very poor land, and it is a peculiar

thing that the poorer the soil, the finer and more prolific do these two plants grow. The centaury, too, is a great lover of poor soil—barren, stony ground. I notice also a quantity of scarlet pimpernel still in blossom, and apparently an equal lover of poor soil. Thistles abound here as well, and the whole makes excellent cover for the pheasants and partridges, hares and rabbits.

'Just on the edge of the wood here, notice this large colony of willow herb. It is the Rosebay species, a wild plant which is worth cultivation in any garden, and a really beautiful, stately flower. Now it has practically gone to seed, and the soft, silky and abundant down presents a very striking appearance. Notice that the seed vessels have burst and scattered their seeds in all directions.

'Tis indeed a lovely sunset. We have had many beautiful sunset effects this mellow September. This is, as Hood, the poet, sings—

> '"That mellow season of the year,
> When the hot sun singes the yellow leaves
> Till they be gold—and with a broader sphere
> The moon looks down on Ceres and her sheaves;
> When more abundantly the spider weaves,
> And the cold wind breathes from a chillier clime."'

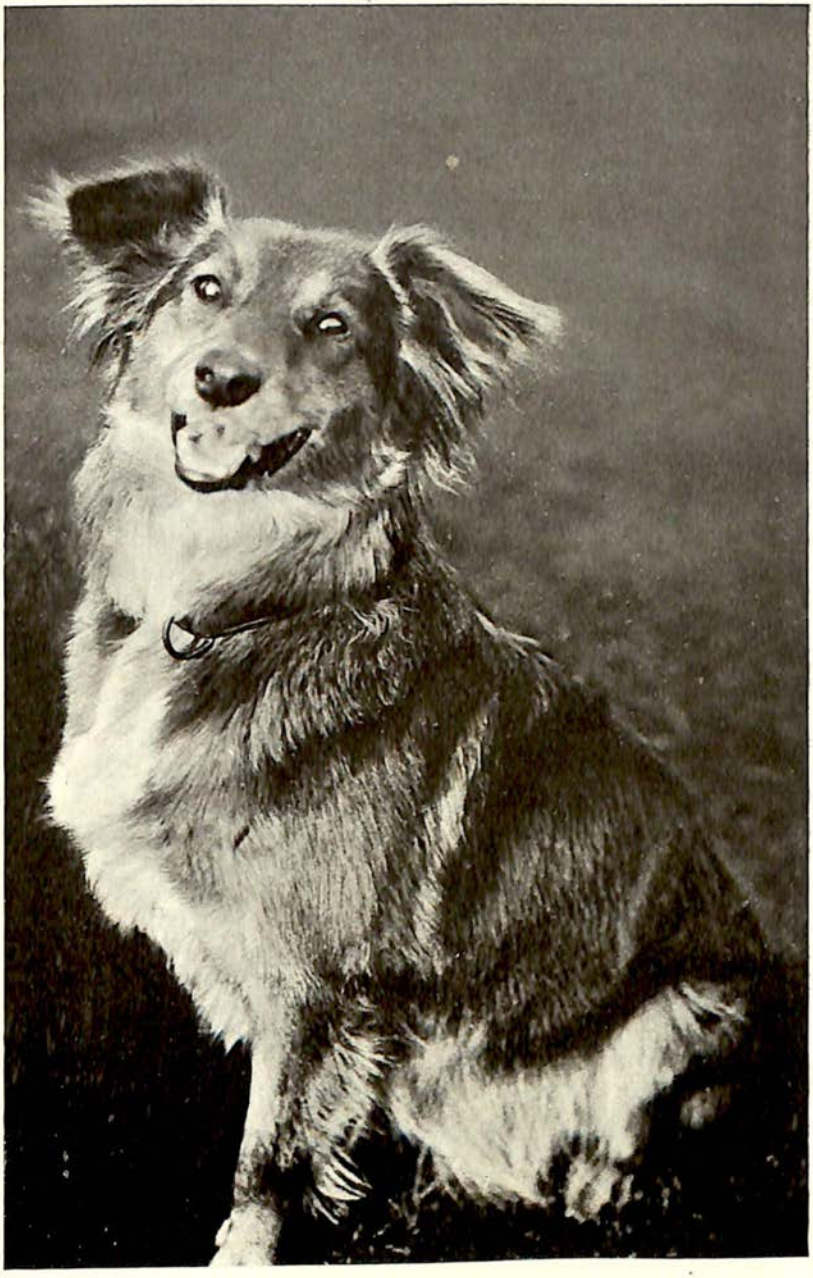


FIG. 94.—OUR FRIEND THE DOG.

XL

SEPTEMBER—FIFTH WEEK

The Partridge and the Pheasant—Their Introduction to England—The Nuthatch—The Green Woodpecker—Titmice—The Bugle

'IT hardly seems possible, Stanley, that this is our last September ramble, and that we have come close up to the first day of chill October. Pheasant shooting begins on the first, and many of the birds which we have been watching since they were tiny little mites will, in a few hours from now, be stiff and cold. It seems strange, does it not, that the keeper who has been so kind to them during the past two or three months should, as soon as October sets in, be the chief organizer for their destruction.

'For weeks past he has jealously guarded his precious pheasants; he has been up early and late, often all night, watching them, and has mixed their food many dozens of times. The food he has prepared has had as much care bestowed upon it as your mother takes when making a plum pudding

at Christmas-time, and you know what a business that is, don't you?

'The keeper has killed many enemies—real and so-called—of his chicks; hawks, owls, jays, jackdaws, magpies, rooks, cats, weasels, stoats, among others. A colony of children could not have had more care and attention given to them, and yet, when the fateful day arrives, when the report of the guns can be heard cracking through the woodland, one knows that the pheasant is doomed to die.

'It is reckoned that every pheasant reared costs at least one pound, and one can well believe the statement, when everything is considered—labour, food, apparatus, land, etc.

'Partridges are not looked after nearly so well by the gamekeeper, although their nests are jealously guarded. The partridge, however, is a much hardier, and more of a wild, bird than the pheasant, and is more able to take care of and look after himself than his larger relative.'

'It does seem a pity, Uncle, to shoot these lovely pheasants. Please tell me more about these birds.'

'Well, the pheasant, it is believed, was brought over to our country by the Romans, many hundreds of years ago. As long ago as thirteen hundred years before Christ it was supposed to have been brought into Europe from its native habitat—the

shores of the Caspian Sea. The Romans, you know, brought to this country the lovely fallow deer which you may now see in some of our large parks, and the edible, or eatable, snail. It is stated that the pheasant was introduced about the same time.

'I told you just now that it is reckoned that the cost to the man who breeds and rears pheasants for shooting purposes is as much as a sovereign for every bird; yet we are told that in the reign of Edward I. one could be purchased for the small sum of fourpence; a vast difference in price from what we are asked to pay during the reign of King Edward VII.

'We must now leave this handsome game bird, and devote our attention to some of the other tenants of the countryside. Listen now to the shrill note of the nuthatch, sounding through the woodland, and I heard, just now, a green woodpecker pealing out quite a ripple of laughter-like notes. Of both these birds, and the nuthatch especially, we shall see a great deal more when the foliage is off the trees. After the leaves have fallen, too, we shall more easily observe several members of the titmice family, the tree creeper, and other species of birds which mostly resort to the neighbourhood of woodland. See how the nuts have fallen, and how the beech nuts and the acorns come tumbling to the ground when the wind blows!

Pick a few blackberries and eat them, and notice how tasteless they are becoming, all sure signs of autumn's triumphal march.'

'Oh, Uncle, I declare here is some beetroot growing in the very middle of this wood! I thought beetroot only grew in gardens?'

'No, Stanley, the plants your quick and observant eyes have fastened upon are not beetroot at all, although I must confess that the dark, purple-coloured leaves are very much like those of the beet. The plants here in this secluded woodland are those of the bugle. You will remember the spikes of blue flowers which these plants bore in the summer-time. Now you can hardly recognize them as, the flowering period being at an end, they have grown such a number of leaves as to become almost unrecognizable. I congratulate you, however, on being so quick as to observe the likeness of the beet leaves to those of the bugle, and it is curious to notice that the name of both plants begins with a "B."'

Little Stanley did indeed enjoy his walk and talk over the fields and through the woods on this our fortieth ramble, gathering mushrooms (eatable and otherwise), acorns, beech nuts, hazel nuts, and horse-chestnuts. When he arrived home, and the contents of his pockets were emptied out, a large assortment of wild fruits of the countryside were displayed to view, some—

the mushrooms especially—being in a sad state of preservation, owing to the eagerness with which the companion of my rambles gathered the fruits from Nature's storehouse, and packed them away in his pockets.

XLI

OCTOBER—FIRST WEEK

The Larks' Song—The Hedge-Sparrow—The Rook—The Ring-Dove — Hips and Haws and Mountain-Ash Berries—Sheepfolds

'UNCLE, I can hear a skylark singing beautifully this morning. It seems quite a long while since we heard one, and it is most pleasing, isn't it, to listen once again to its welcome song?'

'I am glad you noticed that lark, Stanley. I caught the notes directly we went out this morning, but purposely refrained from drawing your attention to them, as I wished to see whether you would identify the song without my pointing it out to you. Your ears have not deceived you, for this is the first lark we have heard for several weeks past. The moulting season of this bird is now at an end, and so soon as this has taken place the blithe bird resumes singing.

'Although so late in the year, this resumption of song by the lark is fresh evidence in the bird

FIG. 95.—THE SNOW BUNTING.
FIG. 96.—THE WOODLAND IN OCTOBER.

world that springtime will surely come again. This bird will not sing to any great extent until towards the end of next January, but it will sing pretty freely between now and then, and will not cease altogether until next August or September, so that you see the lark sings for practically ten and a half months, at least, out of the twelve, and is undoubtedly the most continuous song-bird in the British Isles. Many people are of opinion that the robin—because its song may be heard during the depth of winter—is our most continuous songster, but this is not so, for the favourite skylark is easily ahead of the redbreast, so far as the length of its song period is concerned.

'See on this newly ploughed field what a number of birds are disporting themselves—chaffinches, greenfinches, sparrows, yellow buntings, and starlings. Listen also to the cheery little song of the hedge-sparrow. It is some time since we heard the pretty warble of this bird, and this is another sure sign of springtime. Many people rarely hear the song of the hedge-sparrow. It is low in compass, and mostly sung in the same strain; but, to those who have the listening and attentive ear, the sweet little song cannot fail to be heard even amongst the babel of bird voices in spring.

'What good tempers and high spirits the rooks seem to be in this beautiful October morning! They

evidently appreciate the mildness of the season, and are revelling in the autumn sunshine. Just listen to the strange rook language. How different many of the notes are to the better-known "caws." The notes now being uttered seem to sound more like "croos" and "crooks," and, if we did not happen to see the bird, we might, perchance, wonder who was the author of such language. See how the ring-doves tumble out of the trees as we approach them, and what a loud noise they make. Unlike the noiseless turtle-dove, the ring-dove, or wood-pigeon, is all bustle and excitement when one disturbs him, and makes no pretence at concealing his temerity.

'Of all wild birds of the woodland, the ring-dove is the wildest, even more so than the shrieking jay, which this morning is making the wood reverberate with his harsh notes. Follow that ring-dove which has just flown from that hawthorn tree. Does he not possess splendid powers upon the wing? See how he rushes madly through the air, as if exerting himself to the very utmost, then suddenly spreads his wings out and glides along, for all the world like a cyclist who has been pedalling very hard and then commences free-wheeling! How enjoyable it must be to be able to free-wheel in the air like the ring-dove—what a delightful sensation indeed! We may loop the loop at some place of amusement; enjoy ourselves on the

water-chute, and other forms of entertainment, but we have yet to learn how to fly, and how to freewheel, like the ring-dove in the air.

'Along this berry-laden hedgerow notice the birds taking toll from Nature's bountiful larder. Here are thrushes, blackbirds, greenfinches, and starlings, all greedily devouring hips and haws and mountain-ash berries. What very large crops of shining red fruits there are, and what a pretty countryside picture this hedgerow would make if put upon canvas! Beneath our feet many species of fungi cannot escape attention, and as you have the opportunity you might gather another basketful of edible mushrooms whilst the crop lasts.

'Now we have reached a sheepfold. See how the sheep watch us, as if keenly interested in our movements, and listen to the shrill alarm notes of the meadow-pipits, which may often be observed near a sheepfold. These birds are mostly winter visitors from the North, although a few pairs do stay and nest amongst us. I remember when in Scotland a few summers ago how plentiful these birds were across the moors, and how pleasant it was on those lonely moorlands to listen to the meadow-pipit's tinkling song.

'On the Scottish moors one meets with very few song-birds, and although the meadow-pipit cannot in any way be compared with our beautiful tree-pipit as a song-bird, I retain very pleasant

memories of our winter visitor when I was naturalizing in the land of the thistle.

'Our forty-first walk and talk has been almost entirely devoted to our friends the birds, for at this season of the year they become more prominent than during the wealth of summer.'

XLII

OCTOBER—SECOND WEEK

A Strong North Wind—Falling Leaves and Fruit—'Conquers'—Wild Rabbits—Exquisite Autumn Tints

'WE will commence our ramble this morning, Stanley, by reciting a verse of poetry. As we face northwards, the wind is blowing directly in our faces; add to this the fact that a cheery redbreast is pouring forth with much sweetness his autumn song, and I am reminded of the following lines, which I learned when I was a boy, and which have remained with me until now. Listen to the poetry—

'"The north winds do blow,
And we shall have snow,
And what will the robin do then, poor thing?
He'll sit in a barn
To keep himself warm,
And hide his head under his wing, poor thing."

'Tis indeed a fine bracing morning, and there must be no loitering, or we shall suffer ill effects from the chill air. The wind is strong. See how

the leaves are careering through the air, torn from their summer homes in the tree-tops. They linger for a little while in the air, then reaching mother earth, they are whisked along at a rare pace, sometimes being carried a great distance from the tree on which they grew.

'The acorns come pelting down, and some oak trees are almost destitute of fruit. Several species of trees—the maple especially—have now lost all their leaves, and look miserably bare already. Here we are under a horse-chestnut tree. See how the ground is strewn with the beautiful dark liver-coloured chestnuts. Some have fallen encased in their prickly husks; others, on reaching the ground, have split asunder, and been scattered in all directions. Here is my satchel; take it from me, and fill it with chestnuts. You can bore a hole in these during the long winter evenings, and thread them upon a string. Notice in some of the prickly cradles there are two, and sometimes three chestnuts, and how beautifully they fit into each compartment. There isn't much room for turning round, is there?'

And didn't Stanley enjoy himself this chill October morning, running hither and thither excitedly gathering the precious 'conquers' as if they were so many golden sovereigns. When a gust of wind blew, down came the fruits pattering to the ground, and more than one struck my young

companion and me as we roamed under the golden chestnut tree.

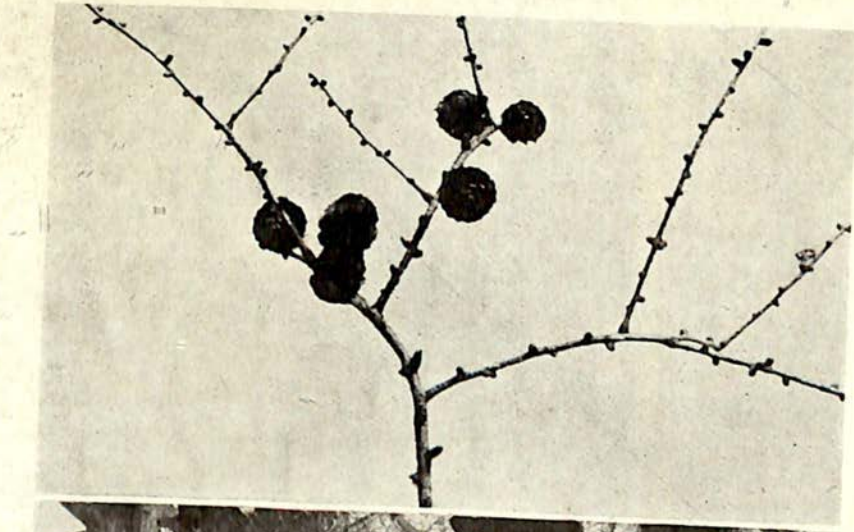
Many of the chestnuts had been sampled by animals—I suspect by the rabbits which abound here, and several of which we frightened away as we approached the woodland. Stanley had never been so near real wild rabbits before, and he jumped with surprise and delight when an inquisitive bunny ran right across our path, jumping and springing like a piece of elastic as it proceeded.

Then a proud, stately cock pheasant came stalking out of the wood with measured tread, surveying the ground around. Although the air was so chilly, swallows and martins were still skimming across the meadows, and meadow-pipits were continually heard uttering their shrill alarm notes.

'Stanley, the autumn tints are becoming very beautiful, and one or two patches of colour, which specially attract our notice in Nature's panorama now, will not be beaten even when the exquisite colours are at their very best. The beech and the horse-chestnut are golden yellow, the maple bears them company. At our feet the red and yellow of the bramble-leaves cannot fail to attract our attention, and the whole countryside is becoming changed and beautified by some unseen hand. Truly we may sing with the poet—

'"The woods of autumn all around our vale
Have put their glory on."

'Why, Stanley, I declare that as a result of coming through that tangled path in the wood, where Nature, so to speak, has been allowed to run riot, your clothes have become quite smothered with the prickly seed heads of the burdock. What a crafty plant this is! Brush against it ever so carefully, and sure enough some of the seed-heads will lay hold of you, in their desire to become distributed through human agency. Cattle brush against the burdock plants, and the needle-like seed-heads adhere to the hair of the cow or the wool of the sheep. I have seen rabbits scampering along with some of the fruit clinging to their furry little bodies; and now you are helping to distribute the seed all unconsciously, and taking it to places where, if we had not chanced to ramble along that particular alley in the woodland, the seed would not probably have been carried.'



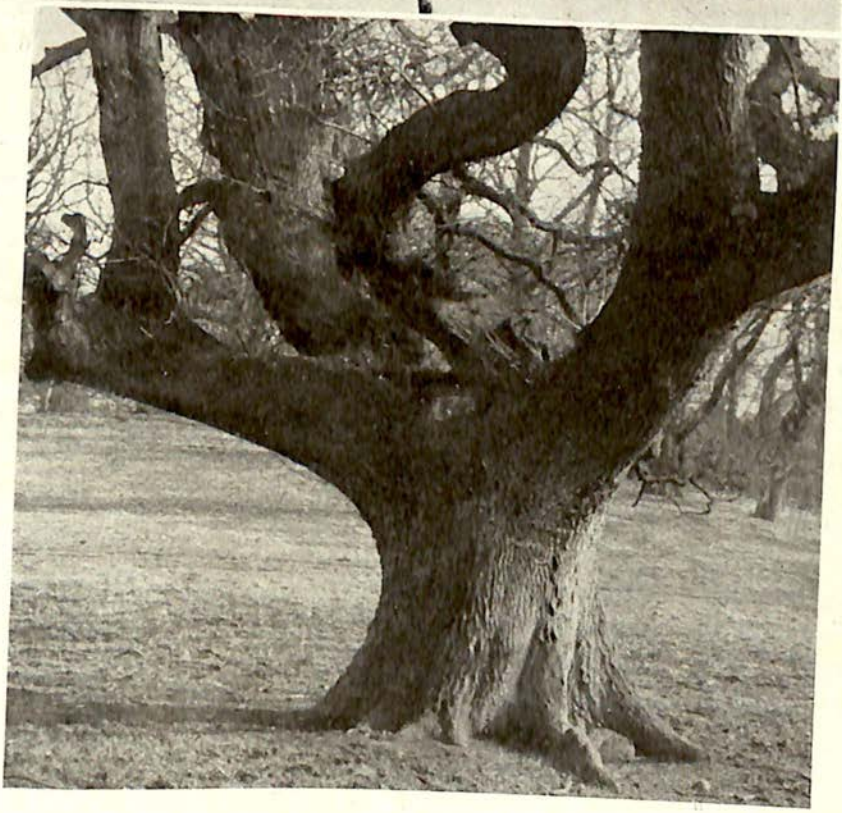


FIG 97.—CONES OF LARCH FIR.
FIG. 98.—A VETERAN OAK-TREE.

XLIII

OCTOBER—THIRD WEEK

Lingering Butterflies—A Belated Dragon-fly—Jack Frost starts Work again

WHAT a lovely morning, Stanley! The air is crisp, and it is no time of the year for idle wanderings; still, the sun is shining bright and beautiful. Truly we have occasion to remember our year with Nature, if for no other reason, because of the glorious summer and autumn we have experienced. The autumn tints are especially beautiful this year, for the weather has been fine and dry; and now, as we ramble where it is woodland, it seems more like the month of mellow September than the end of chill October.

'The weather is so extraordinary that I declare there is a red-admiral butterfly upon the wing. See, he has settled on the disc florets of a mauve and yellow-coloured Michaelmas daisy in the lodge-keeper's garden. I will put him to flight. There, see how hesitatingly he flies, and how jerky and unsteady he seems. He is not the only butterfly

wanderer abroad, for see this small white butterfly fluttering in the air. He has now fallen to the ground, and hardly seems to possess enough strength to rise again. Let us aid the welcome stranger, and toss him in the air. There he goes; but his flight is unsteady, like that of the red admiral. He may not have long to live, unless, perchance, he hybernates during the winter, and lives for a few weeks upon the wing next spring-time. Butterflies in October seem strangely out of place. One seems to think of warm, sunny weather in regard to butterfly life, and on a chill, yet bright morning such as this, it gives one quite a start to observe one or more species upon the wing.

'Wonders will never cease this morning, for there goes a dragon fly buzzing by on unsteady wings. Just watch the coquettish creature as he proceeds on his airy way. He seems to know not where he is going or what he is doing, rushing madly hither and thither in the October sunlight. His days, too, like the butterfly's, are numbered, and the sharp and continual frosts we are experiencing will sooner or later put an end to his life.

'We usually associate him with the hot, sultry days of July and August. Do you remember how, in the heat of summer, we used to sit down by some stream under the welcome shade of a tree, and how we observed the dragon flies careering

over the surface of the rippling water? Often, when I have been fishing during the summer, I have been greatly entertained by the dragon-flies which are to be observed along the streams and ponds, and feasted my eyes upon their quick movements and beautiful colours. But to see dragon-flies in October is, to me, quite a novel experience, and one which must be at once recorded in my Nature note-book.

'I spoke of the severe frosts we have experienced during October. For evidence of King Frost's handiwork just glance at this cottage garden. Here is a sorry state of things indeed. Nasturtiums and dahlias present a somewhat bedraggled appearance; they have been suddenly cut down when blooming most beautifully. See how the leaves have become blackened, and how wet and clammy they feel.

'As soon as either of these plants are first cut asunder you may conclude that the first sharp frost has taken place; and if you had been early astir these last few mornings instead of reposing snugly in your bed, you would have seen the ground quite white with frost. Indeed, as you know, at nine o'clock in the morning even, you have observed the hoar-frost still lingering before the sun had risen high in the heavens. The hoar-frost seems to stay longest, these October mornings, on the saxifrage in the garden, and as late as nine o'clock

it would be possible for a frost picture to be obtained.

'Make the most of our ramble to-day; the autumn tints are at their loveliest now, and these sharp night-frosts mean that the leaves will be quickly displaced from their summer mansions, and soon all will be bare again. Many people consider autumn the loveliest season of the year; and when we enjoy a season like the present, we can but admire the richness and the beauty of Nature's autumnal treasures.'

XLIV

OCTOBER—FOURTH WEEK

Welcome Rain—The Handsome Goldfinch—Protection against Extinction—Golden Plover—The Coltsfoot—The White Dead Nettle

'WELCOME rain fell early this morning, Stanley. The farmers will spend a happy day, for the rain will have done an immense amount of good to the land, and especially after the exceptionally dry autumn we have experienced.

'See how this field is becoming quite green from the shooting corn. After the rain it will make rapid headway, especially as to-day is such a balmy spring-like day. If the trees were fresh and green, instead of yellow and red, one might imagine the month to be April, that sweet month which, as the poet has written, "With its sunny smiles, comes, and all our hearts beguiles." Just listen to the larks singing overhead. Are they not in jubilant song? It is quite a long time since we listened to

such an outburst of music in larkland; the whole air seems flooded with delicious melody.

'Listen again intently. I hear above the lark chorus a shriller, more impetuous kind of song. Yes, it is, as I thought, a goldfinch, singing in yonder oak tree. How enjoyable to listen to this very handsome finch, and to note that the numbers are increasing, as a result of the protection afforded the bird by our county councils. You must know that this lovely bird was, and still is, much sought after as a cage-bird. Bird-trappers used to catch the goldfinches in large quantities, so much so that there was a grave danger that their numbers would be considerably lessened.

'In some districts the bird has been reported as quite exterminated, and the protection afforded only came just in time. In many counties now, this very handsome, engaging species is protected all the year round, which means that bird-catchers in such districts are not permitted to catch goldfinches at all.

'When you see several of these birds together you speak of them as a "charm," not a "flock;" in the same way as one speaks of a "skein" of swans, a "gaggle" of geese, a "covey" of partridges, etc. I have, during the last few years, seen many "charms" of goldfinches where in previous years I had not seen a single bird. This is especially pleasing to any ardent lover of wild birds, wherever

he may be, and particularly to your Uncle. I make no excuse, therefore, for devoting so much time and attention to the subject to-day.

'Ah! What is that I see in the distance? A flock of birds are wheeling about to the east of us. Now they are coming nearer, I can distinguish their clean-cut wings. It is a flock of golden plover, our visitors from the Far North. These are winter bird-friends, and their presence predicts a hard winter. The golden plover is really a beautiful bird when closely examined, and you will be interested to know that it has two distinct states of plumage during the year. In the summer the under-parts of the golden plover are intense black, but after the moult in autumn pure white takes the place of the black. It is called "golden" because of the rich golden spots which decorate the upper parts, and this golden on the greyish-black ground is very striking and beautiful.

'I remember one particular company of these winter bird-visitors which I observed several years ago. They were wheeling high overhead, and uttered a sweet twittering sound. There were two or three hundreds of the birds, and the low twittering chorus had a most pleasing effect. The note I heard was in no way so distressing as the cry of the lapwing, a very near relative.

'We have devoted a lot of time to the birds this morning, but we must not complete our

forty-fourth tour of inspection of Nature's treasures without making a few references to the wild plants of the countryside. Notice how the frost has laid low the leaves of the coltsfoot. The green, woolly leaves now lay blackened upon the ground, and we shall miss the coltsfoot from our rambles until the advent of another springtime, when the yellow rays will raise their strong heads to the sunlight. The white dead nettle appears to have taken a new lease of life, and does not seem in the least affected by King Frost. How fresh and green the leaves are, and how snowy white the flowers! Even the bees are out to-day, for the warm sunshine has tempted them to collect more honey, whilst yet the weather is to their liking. Industrious little creatures, to be sure! Truly, on this bright, beautiful October morning, they *are* improving the shining hour.'

XLV

NOVEMBER—FIRST WEEK

Duller Days—Studying Nature's Children in their Own Homes—The Restfulness of Nature Study—The Plane Tree of the City

'LATE autumn is here now, Stanley. As soon as the November fogs set in, then one seems to realize that the waning days of autumn-tide are here, and that winter is not far off. Let us sing an autumn song, written by Maud E. Sargent—

'"Bramble-leaves are burning brightly
With a flame of lurid red,
While the plump brown nuts are dropping
From the hazels overhead,
And the autumn winds are wailing
Dirges for the roses dead.

Hosts of odd-shaped gay-hued mushrooms
Stand in paddock, wood, and lane,
Scarlet, yellow, white, and purple,
Brown, and olive swell the train,
Holding up their wee umbrellas,
In the falling autumn rain.

Fading leaves and dying blossoms,
Mist-wreaths rising thick and grey,
White-winged seagulls wheeling, shrieking
O'er the wind-swept heaving bay,
Where the wild white horses revel,
And the curlews wail away."

'Everything is soddened and damp now, and our best days are over. Before the conclusion of our rambles and our talks, we may, perchance, have some fine frosty days, which will make rambling along the countryside most enjoyable; but for the most part our more entertaining walks are nearly at an end. Seven more times we shall ramble together, and then our fifty-two outings will have come and gone. How the time has flown, to be sure! It seems quite a short time ago since we started off so excitedly, on a January morning, to commence our journeyings together. What a lot we have seen and heard, and yet what a great deal we have missed! Still, for all that, I think we have made the most of our time and opportunities, and have a lot to be thankful for.

'We have had close companionship with some of Nature's most common, and yet none the less most wonderful, children. Birds, trees, plants, insects, mammals, reptiles, and many other tenants of Nature's great and interesting nursery have appeared before us, and interested us by their cheery presence or happy voices. We have rambled in the fairyland of living things rather than in the

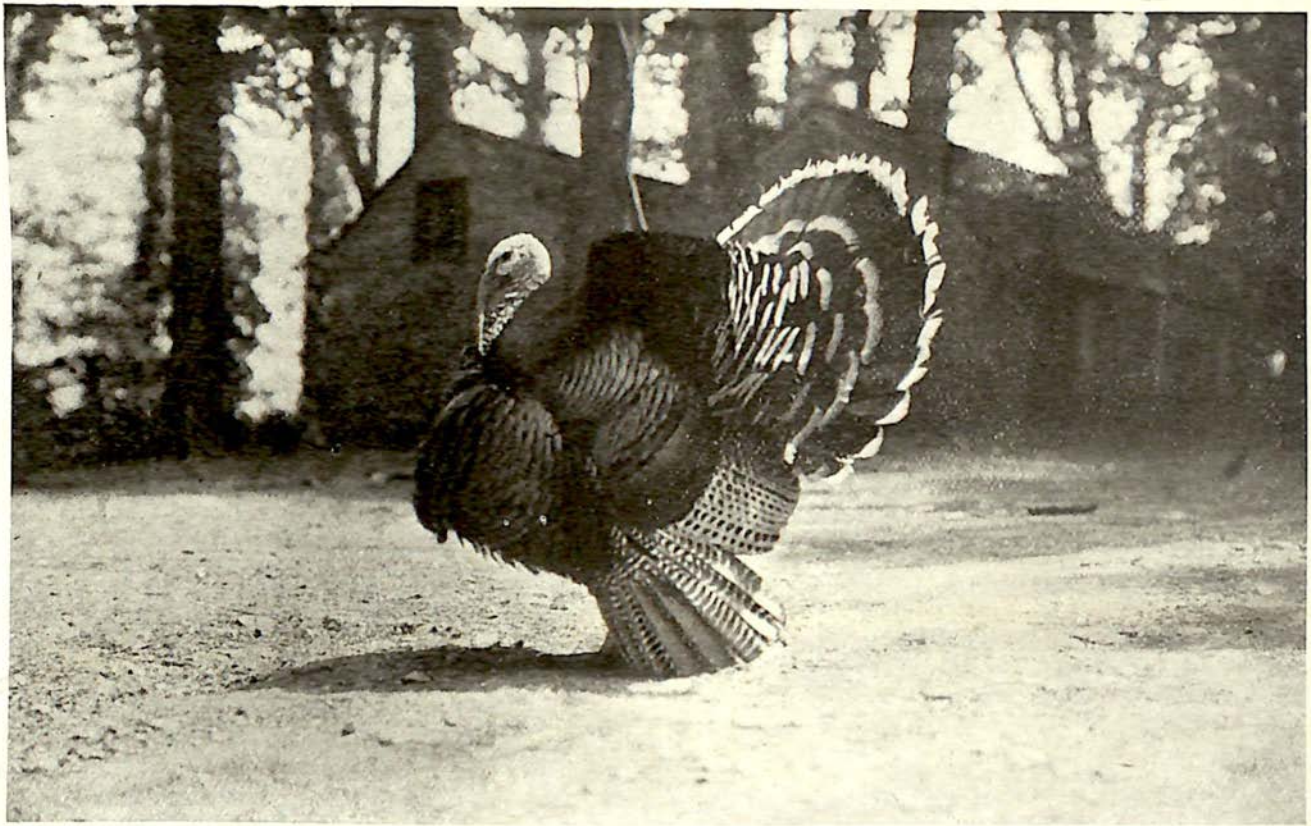


FIG. 99.—A FINE COCK TURKEY WEIGHING 36 POUNDS.

dull atmosphere of a museum, where one more often than not sees mere caricatures of wild life.

'We have gone direct to Nature's remarkable ever-open book, and turned over, as it were, some of the beautiful pages therein. You have never seen or heard so many wonderful things, and it has been a pleasure indeed for me to act as your guide, philosopher, and friend. Sometimes I think that you—little lad that you still are—have turned into the philosopher, and that I remain your guide and friend. Certainly I have had a very apt, responsive, and clever pupil. You have paid attention to all I have been able to point out to you. You have cultivated the seeing eye, and, if I am not mistaken, you have laid in your young mind a solid foundation for the love of Nature study.

'In after years, when you become a man, with all the cares of business upon your shoulders, you will need some recreation, some rest for a much-occupied mind. You will look back then with intense pleasure, I hope, to your fifty-two Nature rambles with your Uncle, and feel that your first acquaintance with much of God's creation was made during this eventful year.

'Just another two verses of poetry before we close our present talk. When I was in a crowded city a few weeks ago, I noticed the plane trees which cheer the eye of the dweller there. I thought how

I should love those leafy trees for their companionship, if I was a resident in some big town, for there one does not see the fine variety of British trees, such as oak, chestnut, elm, beech, and silver birch, which you and I may observe when in the country. And these lines came into my mind—

'"The silver birch is a dainty lady,
She wears a satin gown;
The elm tree makes the old churchyard shady,
She will not live in town.

The chestnut's proud and the lilac's pretty,
The poplar's gentle and tall,
But the plane tree's kind to the poor dull city—
I love him best of all!"'

E. NESBIT.

XLVI

NOVEMBER—SECOND WEEK

Dame Nature's Children—How they Talk and Sing—What Clothes they Wear—How they Work, and Play, and Learn

'TO-DAY I want to talk about Nature's wonderful children. I do not think you will imagine that I am going to talk about wonderful human children, children who may be considered worthy to bear the name of "Wonderful" because of their splendid physique, or on account of the talents they naturally possess. You will probably guess that the great and wonderful family of which I wish to tell you belongs to Dame Nature. Oh! but you say they are not children, they cannot talk; they do not wear clothes; they do not work when they grow older; they do not play; they do not go to school; they are not wonderful like human children; they cannot think; they are not clever; how can you call them "wonderful children"?

'Now, do not let your mind run away with you

so rapidly, but listen to me, my dear young fellow. Let us take the points one by one. These children of Nature cannot talk, eh? Can't they?

'You yourself have, during our walks and talks, been amazed, I feel certain, at the language of birds. Pleasing as are the voices of children at most times, and especially when used in prattle, there is sweet music indeed in the songs of birds, cleverness in their call-notes and cries. This is their language; they can and do talk. We cannot, it is true, interpret their meaning—though sometimes we could make a good guess at that; but we are fully confident that they are easily understood by those in their own realm, and their musical powers are really exerted to attract and please one another rather than for our enjoyment.

'We might enlarge and speak of the language of other wild creatures, from the barking of the fox to the chirping of a cricket, the lullaby song of the grasshopper, or the buzzing of a bluebottle fly!

'But let us proceed. They do not wear clothes! Don't they?

'Birds wear feathers; mammals have beautiful dresses of fur and hair; reptiles and fish have scales; insects are adorned with wings, some of them painted in all colours of the rainbow; plants have flowers in which the essential organs of reproduction—stamens and pistils—are marvellously

clothed, so as to protect their precious little bodies, just as if they were children.

'They do not work! Don't they?

'Remember what I told you about the busy bee improving the shining hour by gathering honey. The bird cleverly weaves its nest, and when the young are hatched, then is the time to see whether Nature's feathered children do not work. You have heard me tell you how the robins in the garden worked, from early in the morning until late in the evening, to procure food for their young ones. Insects lay eggs, the eggs hatch into larvæ or caterpillars; the larva has to work to live, and, having eaten sufficient, he works to form a covering for his poor old body, and turns into a pupa or chrysalis. And then, when he has been there some time, he works to free himself from his prison, and, once free, he commences working again to procure food.

'They do not play! Don't they?

'To see Nature's children at play is one of the keenest pleasures in the fairyland of living things. Watch the rabbits gambol; the rooks playing high overhead in the sunlight on a spring day; the squirrels in their game of hide-and-seek in the tree-tops; the birds chirping and scampering after one another in a frenzied but playful race of tig-first-be-it! Watch again the fish in a clear stream gliding playfully through the crystal water.

'They do not go to school! Don't they?

'Have you never watched a brood of baby flycatchers receiving their first lessons in fly-catching from their clever schoolmaster father and schoolmistress mother? Have you never seen a brood of young swallows or martins being taught to fly, or watched baby moorhens taking their first swim? The subject is such a wide one I cannot enter more closely into it now.

'You have seen, even in a little plant, how wonderful and how clever Nature's children are. Even plants seem to think and reason. Those who study them cannot but admit they are extremely clever, and must be reckoned amongst the most wonderful of Nature's children.

'I hope you have enjoyed this little chat, and that I have been able to bring a few things to your notice of which you were not previously aware.'

'Yes, Uncle, I have been most interested in all you have said, and shall endeavour to profit from what you have told me.'

XLVII

NOVEMBER—THIRD WEEK

Some Plants still flowering — Groundsel — Shepherd's Needle—Laverocks

'IT is a lovely morning, Stanley. We have had a very severe frost during the night, and walking is a pleasure, because the air is so pure and the ground so clean and dry. There is a keen east wind blowing, so that we must keep well on the move, or we shall feel cold. In spite of the hard frost, see here how the white dead nettle is still blossoming; brave little plants battling against King Frost, and the white dead nettle is one of the strongest and the bravest of them all. The groundsel, too, is still flowering; and, I declare, here are several plants of the shepherd's needle looking as bright and cheerful as they do in early spring.

'The birds are busy twittering. It is wonderful the effect a snap of cold weather has upon bird life. They—like you and I—seem in better health and spirits on a cold frosty morning than when

November is damp, foggy, and dreary. Listen to the tits chirping one to another, and also to the pretty little warble of the hedge-sparrow.

'To-day is the seventieth anniversary of the death of James Hogg, the poet. This poet was only a poor shepherd, but became a well-known writer of poetry. Robert Burns, the great Scotch poet, was only a poor ploughman, and yet gave to the world some of the finest poetry we possess, of which "The Cotter's Saturday Night" is the best known. Let me recite to you two verses by James Hogg, who was known as the "Ettrick Shepherd" —Ettrick being the name of the place in Selkirk in which he lived.

'"There's gowd in the breast of the primrose pale,
An' siller in every blossom;
There's riches galore in the breeze of the vale,
And health in the wild wood's bosom.
Then come, my love, at the hour of joy,
When warbling birds sing o'er us;
Sweet Nature for us has no alloy,
And the world is all before us.

The courtier joys in bustle and power,
The soldier in war steeds bounding;
The miser in hoards of treasured ore,
The proud in their pomp surrounding.
But we hae yon heaven sae bonnie and blue,
And laverocks skimming o'er us;
The breezes of health and the valleys of dew—
Oh, the world is all before us!"'

'Uncle, I don't understand some of the words you recited. What does "gowd" and "siller"

mean? And I have never heard you speak of the "laverock." What bird is that?'

'Let me answer your three questions in the order in which you asked me them. "Gowd" is Scotch for "gold"; "siller" means "silver"; and "laverock" is a Scotch local name for the skylark you know and love so well.

'There now, you know a little more of the language of the canny Scot than you did before, and will understand what these words mean when you next see or hear them, won't you?'

'Yes, Uncle, thank you, I shall.'

XLVIII

NOVEMBER—FOURTH WEEK

A Chat about Frogs and Toads—Their Differences—Their Usefulness—Their Curious Early Life-history

'THIS, unfortunately, will be our last ramble in November, Stanley.

'As I was walking along just now I noticed an old toad dragging his poor weather-worn body along the ground. He was a regular old warrior, to be sure.'

'Uncle, please tell me something about frogs and toads. They seem very curious things. I don't know much about them. We seem as if we haven't come across them very often during our many rambles.'

'I shall be very pleased to agree to your request, and especially for two reasons; first, because I am delighted to see you are seeking knowledge, and secondly, because frogs and toads are most useful creatures, and do a great amount of good.

'Now let me point out a few of the chief differences between a frog and a toad. A frog

possesses teeth, the toad does not. A frog lays its eggs in one dense mass; those of the toad are laid in what are called chains. The toad has shorter and stouter legs, and a more bull-dog-like head than the frog; he is not so active in disposition, and has a very warty skin.'

'Uncle, do frogs and toads spit at you? The boys I know say they do.'

'No, no, my dear fellow, pray dispel that ridiculous fable from your mind. The spitting of the frog or the toad is pure imagination. The toad certainly does possess the habit of exuding a slimy substance from its warty skin, as a protection—so it is presumed—against any other creature which might prey upon it, but that is all it does in the way of "spitting."'

'In what way, Uncle, are frogs and toads of use to us?'

'Well, they are entirely insectivorous, or, to put it in simple language, they are insect-feeders, in the same way as many of the birds which belong to the warbler family, like the blackcap, nightingale, whitethroat, and several other species. They lick out insects from crevices and other places by means of their long tongues, which they thrust in and out of their mouths almost as quick as lightning.

'It is a most interesting sight to observe a frog or a toad fly-catching, and it may be that the

quickness with which the wonderful tongue is thrust in and out of the mouth has given rise to the stupid belief that they "spit."

'Every gardener knows how beneficial it is to have toads in the garden or greenhouse, for the purpose of keeping down the insects which infest and sadly injure the plants. Now, a little chat, in conclusion, as to the early life-history of these two creatures.

'The eggs, or spawn, are deposited in ponds in dense masses or in chains. In due time these hatch, and mere little black specks appear. By and by the minute creature grows, and eventually possesses a large bull-dog head and a long tail. Then you know it as a tadpole. In this stage it breathes by means of gills like a fish.

'Later on legs begin to develop, the tail gradually becomes smaller, and eventually the frog or the toad—for such it now is—leaves the water, breathes by means of lungs like you and I, and lives on land. Every frog and toad has, as you see, two distinct states of existence, and even in this simple object-lesson we have a splendid illustration of what is known as evolution, about which you will understand more as you grow older.'

FIG. 100.—A COUNTRY LANE IN WINTER.

XLIX

DECEMBER—FIRST WEEK

Foggy and Damp—Meadow-Pipits—Pied Wagtails: our Smallest Walking Birds—Long-tailed Tits and their Remarkable Nests

'IT is indeed a damp, miserable morning, Stanley; but we are nearing the completion of that upon which we set out, and we will not give in now. Come, let us hie away to the woodland, in spite of the foggy and damp surroundings.

'How shrill the notes of the meadow-pipits sound this morning! It is so foggy we cannot see them yet; but we have learned to know their shrill alarm note so well that we are aware of their presence, although they are entirely out of sight.

'I can hear, too, the abrupt alarm note of a pied wagtail. Ah! see, we can just discern him on that newly ploughed field, foraging about for food. Do you know that in some districts the pied wagtail is only seen during spring and summer, but with us in Hertfordshire it is a

resident bird. That is to say, although our own summer pied wagtails may leave us in the autumn, their places are taken by other individuals which may be regarded as winter visitors only, and so we can find pied wagtails in our district all the year round.

'You will be interested to know that wagtails are the smallest birds that walk. They must certainly be reckoned among the most entertaining British birds we possess, and we should miss them among the companions of our rambles.

'Now we have reached the woodland. Listen to that soft chattering noise which is going on among a company of birds a few yards away. Watch and listen! Here they come, fluttering like so many long-tailed butterflies.'

'Oh! Uncle, what long tails they have!'

'Yes, the birds are long-tailed tits, and during the winter one often observes them going about the countryside in little companies such as this one. I have many times this last year or two had brought to my notice the fact that birds like company, and do not care for solitude.

'As regards the long-tailed tit, this bird builds what is undoubtedly the most wonderful nest of any British bird. The nest of the chaffinch runs it very close; but I think, if a vote were taken, the long-tailed tit would win by a large majority. The nest is a large ball, not round, but roundish,

much deeper than it is wide, and with a small hole near the top. The inside is as cosy a nursery as you could wish for, being lined with a great quantity of soft feathers. Over two thousand have been found in one single nest, and every feather meant a separate journey! Think of the industriousness and the patience of the pair of clever little architects who constructed such a wonderful homestead.

'The foundation of the structure seems to consist of moss, added to which are silver lichens, spiders' webs, and other materials. As many as seventeen young ones have been found in one nest, and it is wonderful how they all manage to find room inside the small dwelling-place.

'People who have seen the nest of this bird have often wondered how a bird with such a long tail manages to sit on her nest without spoiling her feathers. Do you know what Mrs. Tit does to protect herself?'

'No, Uncle; please tell me. It is all so very interesting.'

'She brings her tail right over her back and head when sitting on the nest, and her tiny head and the tip of her tail may often be observed just sticking out of the entrance to her home. Wise little bird!'

L

DECEMBER—SECOND WEEK

Evergreens—Holly—Ivy—The Hornbeam and its Curious Re-leafing

'WE reach our half-century milestone to-day, Stanley. Christmas is upon us, and at this festive season of the year I always think the scarlet berries of the holly add brightness to our homes, as well as to the country-side. See here this holly tree standing close by a much-used roadway. Is not the tree laden with the rich red berries? and will not that tree come in for a big share of attention from passers-by during the next few days? Rather. Why, I do not know of another holly tree within range of our walks which bears such a heavy crop of fruit, and I am sorely afraid it is so tempting that I must have a few sprigs to brighten our own little home. Then, on our way back, we will walk through the big Home Wood, and break off a few nice sprigs of ivy from that tree near the top of the wood, where, you

remember, I have put an owl to flight on more than one occasion.'

'Oh, Uncle! Auntie will be so pleased to have some evergreens, and she does so love ivy. She has told me how fond she has been of ivy ever since she was a tiny girl, and she says it means, "I cling to thee." She likes those sprays, Uncle, those dear little pieces that cling so tightly to the bark of a tree, and the leaves of which spread out quite flat.'

'Yes, I follow you, my boy, and your wishes shall be satisfied ere our walk ends. I know your Auntie's affection for the ivy, and often detach a sprig or two, when I am on my rambles, to take home to her. She seems to appreciate it as much, if not more, than any costly orchid. I love the ivy, too, and so do the bees and other honey-loving insects.

'The holly and the ivy are what are called evergreens, and these and laurels and rhododendrons do much to cheer us during the winter, when most other trees are bare and leafless.

'There is one tree I should like to point out to you to-day, and that is the hornbeam. I often feel constrained to re-christen this wood we are now in, and call it Hornbeam Wood, for it is very nearly full of this species of tree.'

'Why, Uncle, these hornbeam trees are covered with brown leaves. Are the trees dead?'

'No, Stanley, the trees are by no means dead, although the leaves might on first sight lead you to such a conclusion. The hornbeam is one of the very few British trees which retain their leaves during winter, although, truly enough, they are in a shrivelled condition. If you will just examine a few of the branches, you will notice that at the base of every leaf-stalk another leaf-bud is forming. By and by, when the sap rises in the springtime, and it is the season of re-leafing, that little leaf-bud will expand and grow. Eventually it will take command of the space now occupied by the shrivelled leaf, and almost push the dead leaf from its moorings.

'Early nesting birds often take advantage of the dead leaves of this tree as cover to hide their homesteads in, so that, regarded from this point of view alone, the hornbeam, by retaining its dead leaves until another springtide, is of great service to our feathered friends.'

LI

DECEMBER—THIRD WEEK

The Dandelion again—Thrushes, Hedge-Sparrows, and Chaffinches—The Chrysanthemum—The Advantages of a Changing Climate

'INSTEAD of our year with Nature gradually drawing to a close, Stanley, it really seems as if we are commencing again, for see, here is a dandelion in blossom, shining like a small sunflower in the December sunshine! You will remember that when we started our walks with Nature last January, we noted this plant as one of the very first to open its welcome blossoms.

'How time passes! Time and tide, the old proverb says, wait for no man. It seems almost impossible that nearly twelve months have passed since we gazed upon the first dandelion of the year. I remember where we saw it as if it were only yesterday, and could, I believe, go and find the very plant. The one we have just looked at is an early arrival, some few weeks ahead of last season. I wonder how many people passing along

this much-frequented roadway have noticed this dandelion blossom? Not many, I guess. You see, *we* come out to look for these things, and it is the old story of eyes and no eyes. In fact, this is one of the reasons why I have written down for publication in book form the accounts of the rambles we have enjoyed together.

'Well, then, we have further evidence that another year in Nature's calendar will soon be commencing in the songs of the thrushes and hedge-sparrows. The latter birds seem to be able to sing their full and cheery songs whenever they choose; but it is different with the thrushes. It takes them some little time to tune their lutes, and it is often amusing to listen to the notes they utter.

'I have noticed the same thing in connection with the chaffinch. Very early in the spring you may hear several chaffinches uttering their half-finished songs. The full song does not come to them all at once. It is assumed gradually, and reminds one of a singer who practises a song several times, leaving off now and again to make perfect a portion which he does not sing correctly. Then, presently, the time arrives when the song has to be given in public, and the very best effort is put forth. It is the same with the song and mistle-thrushes to-day. They have started practising for the great concert which is to take place

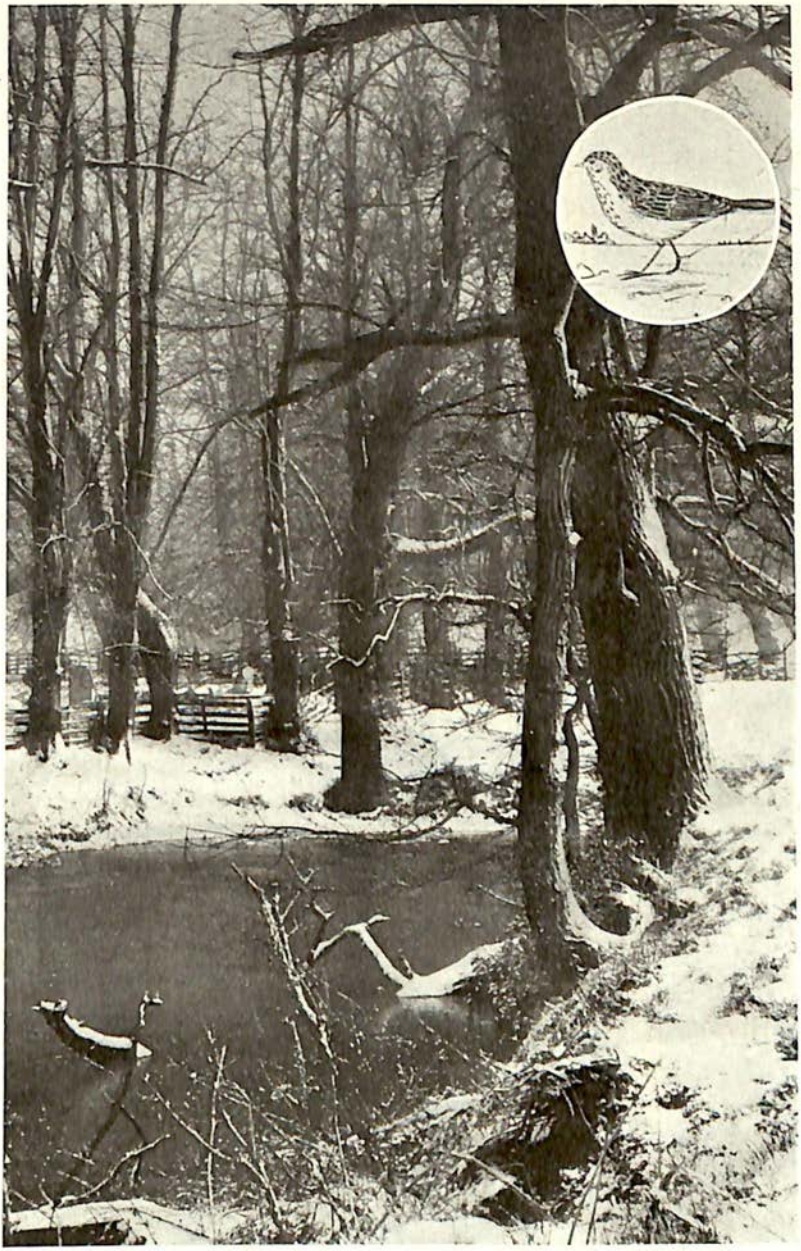


FIG 101.—THE SKYLARK.
FIG. 102.—AFTER THE STORM.

in the springtime, and their full blast of music is only acquired by degrees.

'The weather is very mild and open for December, and I notice in the countryside gardens that chrysanthemums are still blossoming. Truly we live in a very changeable climate. One day biting cold, the next dull, close, and oppressive. And although we often hear people grumbling as to the uncertainty of our weather, it is in a large measure owing to our climate that we have become the great nation we now are. It is because of our climate that our explorers can penetrate into the arctic regions or into the tropical south.

'Very few people stop to think how far climate affects human progress, but when they do they cannot do other than admit that there is a good deal of truth in the few simple facts which I have given; and these should make us less ready to grumble at the ever-changing weather we often experience.'

LII

DECEMBER—FOURTH WEEK

The Ending Year—Stanley thanks his Tutor for the Rambles and the Instruction

OH, Uncle, I am so sorry to think that this is our last Nature Ramble together! I have so enjoyed our walks and talks that I wish they were only just beginning, instead of ending. Will you promise me, Uncle, that some day, when you have time, you will again permit me to come with you on your country walks? I shall never forget our interesting rambles together, and would like to thank you ever so much for all your kindness to me, and for showing me the many interesting things you have pointed out.'

'Bravo! my little chap, bravo! What a delightful speech you have made! I am sure I feel amply repaid for what I have been able to do for you. As you say, our walks and talks have been most interesting and instructive to us both, and I hope that some time in the near

future we may be able to resume our companionship, and again seek out some of Nature's wonderful treasures. I must say that you have been a most apt and appreciative pupil, and a charming companion.

'We have not wandered far from home in our journeyings, but, all the same, I think each ramble has resulted in both of us gaining knowledge and being strengthened in body and refreshed in mind.

'And all that you have seen and heard of Nature's wonderful children, Stanley, may be revealed to any intelligent British boy or girl, and I hope you will make a point of communicating to your playmates and school-chums what a delightful time may be spent in the country by cultivating the seeing eye and the receiving ear.

'Our Nature Rambles, with their talks, have sped away at all too quick a pace; but the hand of Nature's clock is ever on the move and waiteth for no one. Even in our quiet way, we have learned several wonderful object-lessons as a result of our close intimacy with Dame Nature, and we can look back with great pleasure upon our weekly wanderings.

'And now, as it is the last day of the old year, and in a few hours we shall have entered upon another period in our lives, let me at once

wish you a very happy and prosperous New Year. May your future be joyous and full of brightness, and may you always look back with pleasure upon your early days with Nature!'

'Uncle, a fond nephew offers you a thousand thanks.'

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